

# **Management Material: Understanding the Contradictory Perspectives of Lower Level Managers in a Canadian Call Centre**

by

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## Abstract

Call centres have emerged during a time of rapid technological change and represent a form of ready employment for those seeking to replace or supplement “traditional” forms of employment. Call centre work is considered characteristic of the kinds of service work available in the new economy. This paper examines the experiences and practices of lower level managers in a call centre in southern Ontario. Findings are based on analysis of semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest that lower level managers resolve the contradictory social space they occupy by aligning themselves primarily with more powerful executives, in part because they know this might lead to increased job security. The implications of this trend for building a strong labour movement capable of combating neoliberal discourses regarding the need for work restructuring are discussed.

*Taking the place of the social rights-bearing citizen...is one who is re-familialized, individualized, and marketized...[A] shift from secure employment with benefits and decent wages to precarious jobs that are short term, unprotected, and poorly compensated has become a strong symbol of the general trend towards a marketized citizen. Many of these transformations in paid work are extensively documented and undeniable. What they mean for the well-being of individuals and their communities is, however, an intensely contested question.*

- Janet Siltanen

*for Dean*

I am honoured to have been supervised by Ann Duffy and June Corman and wish to express my sincere thanks for their help. Ann and June are good supervisors, yes, but more than that, they are leaders-by-example.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction – Why Call Centres?.....	1
<i>Marxist theoretical framework</i> .....	3
<i>Lower level managers</i> .....	8
<i>The new economy</i> .....	14
Unionizing the Service Sector – What We Already Know.....	24
<i>Life in the call centre</i> .....	26
<i>New employees for a new economy</i> .....	30
<i>Unionism and the labour left</i> .....	35
Methodological Considerations – Looking for Labour.....	43
<i>Profile of the research participants</i> .....	52
Management material – Situating Lower Level Managers.....	57
<i>Labour process and policy in the call centre</i> .....	58
<i>The experience of managing others</i> .....	62
<i>Perceived relevance of collective action</i> .....	71
<i>Interpersonal problems</i> .....	81
Conclusions – State of the Unions.....	87
Works Cited.....	95
Appendix I – Research Ethics Application.....	102
Appendix II – Letter of Invitation.....	114
Appendix III – Informed Consent Form.....	115

## Introduction

### Why Call Centres, Why Now?

My professional interest in working-class culture and the transformation of work in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the impact of those changes on workers in the new millennium is a natural extension of my own experience in the world of work. The inspiration for this particular project came when those of my friends and family who had been employed in call centres began to receive promotion into the supervisory and low level management positions which abound in the contemporary workplace. My research questions sprang from my own observations of their experiences transitioning from life “on the phone” to suddenly supervising and managing those on the phones and adapting to the conflicting demands faced by the lower echelons of management staff.

In the past ten years there has been a dramatic increase in the amount of research on call centres globally, mirroring the expansion of the industry<sup>1</sup> from a method for large companies to handle their customer call overflow to a global enterprise used by both the public and private sectors. The existing call centre research runs the gamut from praise for this innovative scheme for employing those displaced from traditional sectors of employment to unmitigated critiques of “‘battery hen’ operations” (Larner, 2002: 147). The vast majority of the research focuses on the real plight of telephone agents – those call centre workers at the front lines: handling inquiries, providing technical support, making hotel reservations, and so on. These are the workers who must juggle the competing demands of customers, managers, and clients (see especially Belt, Richardson,

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<sup>1</sup> Call centres do not form their own industry, properly speaking. In Canada, call centres are subsumed under the Business Support Services Industry. For simplicity’s sake, I will refer to call centres as an industry throughout. See Ernest B. Akyeampong (2005) for a discussion of job categories in Canada. Here I will briefly note that according to Vincent and McKeown (2008) this “industry” reported revenues of \$2.76 billion in 2006 (4).

and Webster (2000); Brannen (2005); Hanna (2010); Huws and Dahlmann (2009); McFarland (2002); Mirchandani (2004); Pandey and Rogerson (2012); Pupo and Noack (2010); and Taylor and Bain (2008)).

Such research, while valuable, leaves out a range of experiences, including the experiences of call centre workers who are not actively engaged in taking customer phone calls. Hence, my motivation for undertaking the current research project was two-fold. First, I wanted to explore the work processes behind the calls by interviewing lower level managers responsible for carrying out those duties which ensure the day-to-day functioning of the call centre. These “off-phone” positions can include human resource jobs, training jobs, finance jobs, and quality control jobs. Clearly, the existing literature’s focus on frontline workers has left a gap in the research on call centres, because, as Goertzel (1979) tells us, managers have a distinctive, under-researched view (as cited in Livingstone and Mangan, 1996: 22).

Second, I felt compelled to add a specifically Marxist analysis to the academic conversation about call centres to contest those analyses which provide an unproblematic version of the emergence of call centre work. An explicitly Marxist, worker-centred response to the call centre industry and other forms of employment emerging in the new economy is important to revitalizing a flagging labour movement. It is difficult for workers to have a strong sense of their rights and to be able to formulate a coherent critique of the various market forces that shape their lives in a social milieu that does not have a strong “pro-labour” discourse on which workers can draw and, in addition, that is characterized by decreasing access to unionized employment. In the new economy, the delegitimation of the “labour left” coincides with layoffs in traditionally unionized

sectors and drastic losses in union density. The jobs that are emerging to replace manufacturing jobs have not been unionized in large numbers.<sup>2</sup> The consequences of these dual trends can be wide-reaching, demanding a coherent response from researchers studying the world of work. In addition, the apparent ubiquity of neo-liberal interpretations of work have a nullifying effect on the consciousness of workers. Where neo-liberalism is still relied upon for the creation of policies related to employment, research which analyses the impact of neo-liberal discourse on the consciousness of Canadian workers is vital.

### ***Marxist Theoretical Framework***

A Marxist approach to call centre work is perhaps best equipped to destabilize neo-liberal discourses about work which have become both common-place and, more importantly, “common sense.” Such discourses ask workers to accept increasingly precarious work arrangements and low wages, and mask alienating and exploitative working conditions as natural, or if not natural, then inevitable or unavoidable.

A Marxist theoretical framework assumes that the interests of workers and capital are “diametrically opposed to each other” (Marx, 1933: 39). That is, what is necessary for the expansion of capital is precisely what is detrimental to workers, and vice versa. For example, survival of capital depends on a continuous rise in profits, which in turn relies on a decrease in wages *relative to profits* – that is, while wages may increase they can never increase at the same rate of profit (*Ibid*). Therefore, as profits grow, wages must shrink as a proportion of profits, or capitalist expansion must cease (*Ibid*). As capitalism

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<sup>2</sup> Pupo and Noack (2010) demonstrate that even though call centre workers in the public sector are protected by a collective agreement they report working conditions similar to those described by private sector call centre workers (126). In other words, even in unionized environments, white collar workers can be “treated as contingent labour” and “subjected to authoritarian management practices” (*Ibid*).



expands, it broadens the gap between capital and labour (*Ibid*). But it also brings increasingly more and more communities, objects, services, and relations into its grip, turning everything into a commodity and everyone into a labourer/consumer. In both these crucial ways (the degrading of labour and the generalizing of the institution of wage labour) capital creates the conditions for “a greater dependence of labour on capital” (*Ibid*). Improving the lot of the worker (either increasing her wages or ameliorating the conditions of her work) neither gives the worker independence from capital nor changes the structural relationship of wage-labour to capital – that capital may expand *only at the expense of the worker*.

Therefore, where working conditions have in some sense been improved by government legislation and by struggles won by workers, most often by forming a trade union, it is possible for Huws and Dahlmann to say, some 160 years after Marx argued that improving the lot of workers was an inadequate response to capitalist expansion, that the technological changes in part designed to do just that, in fact only serve to threaten worker solidarity, by repeatedly changing labour processes, the skills required to do a job, and the very jobs which are in existence (2009: 3). According to Huws and Dahlmann, these constant fluctuations in job categories, skill sets, and occupational groups, destabilize workers’ identities, hindering solidarity amongst workers, which a Marxist theoretical perspective assumes is the worker’s best hope against the market forces that constrain their lives. Computerisation and the advent of the internet, while making work less physically exerting, accelerated these trends as, according to Huws and Dahlmann, computerisation could only be accomplished after thorough standardisation and rationalization of labour processes (*Ibid*: 4). The restructuring of work engendered by

computerisation "...because it involves a further fragmentation of labour processes...can be regarded as contributing to an elaboration of the division of labour..." (Ibid). The increased flexibility that employers enjoy in the new, computerized economy coincides with "the increasing replaceability of workers" (Ibid: 4).<sup>3</sup>

In the "enormous global reshuffling of work," Huws and Dahlmann suggest that occupational identities, which have been shaped over many years, in some cases centuries, by regional cultures, national institutions, the results of past tussles between workers and management and the specific nature of the ethnic and gender division of labour in the locality, have been transformed almost beyond recognition. Whether this transformation represents a move upwards or downwards in the local occupational hierarchy will vary depending on these different variables. Likewise, its implications for workers' abilities to 'place' themselves in relation to each other and maintain or develop forms of collective identification and allegiance will also vary (2009: 6).

Lastly, a Marxist theoretical perspective takes for granted that exploitation is distinct from inequality – that capitalism is not simply characterized by the existence of extreme poverty and extreme wealth. Wright (1985) argues that class exploitation is marked by "a *causal relationship* between the affluence of the lord and the poverty of the serf" or, in capitalism, between the affluence of the capitalist and the poverty of the proletariat (36, emphasis mine). Affluence is not the product of chance or industry; it is the result of the appropriation of surplus labour (Ibid).

In contemporary capitalism there exist those with some wealth who are not capitalists, but members of a broad and highly variegated middle class. Wright's sustained engagement with the problem of classifying these middle classes shows just how complex they are. Wright is concerned with whether or not the existence of a

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<sup>3</sup> Clark and Warskett (2010) note that Taylorist revisions to work processes coincide with employers' attempts to maximize profits through increased control over tasks. Work becomes more fragmented, meaningless, and mechanized (238). In addition, dividing up tasks and standardizing labour processes makes it easier to replace workers who are no longer valued for their judgment and experience, but as cogs in the wheel.

relatively broad and stable middle class is contradictory to the traditional Marxist model of two polarized, historical classes. Marx himself acknowledges the existence of those within the capitalist mode of production who seem neither to fall into the category “bourgeoisie” nor “proletariat” but deemphasizes this trend, and maintains that over time these middle categories would be pulled up or down, in accordance with capitalism’s polarizing tendency (1993: 44-48 and Wright, 1985: 8). Yet, Wright explains, the seeming expansion of “professional and technical occupations” and “managerial hierarchies” over the past century places doubt on whether capitalism really has polarizing tendencies (Wright, 1985: 8-9). Wright examines the multiple ways in which actors in the middle strata earn a living, and the wildly varying incomes within these strata. These middle strata are distinguished from the capitalist class by the necessity of earning a wage, but Wright’s research asks the question, can wage-earners always be considered working class?

For my part I consider it appropriate to make a class distinction between relatively powerful and well-paid executives and those managers at the lower end of the ladder who have little control over their labour process and probably also struggle to make ends meet. While I consider Wright’s analysis to be insightful and valuable, the scope of this paper cannot address the issue of whether the existence of seemingly middle class actors threatens the foundation of traditional Marxism. My research participants are certainly sufficiently on the “losing end” of the neo-liberal battle over production and wages for it to be worthwhile for them to engage in class struggle against the capitalist class rather than against the working class.

My research explores workers' attitudes in a "new economy" where they may face new vulnerabilities and intensifying ideological attacks on discourses that support the right of workers to safe, fulfilling, democratically-organized work. As I will elucidate further below, my research focuses on lower level managers because they occupy a unique position within the call centre. While called upon to supervise and surveil on-phone staff, their objective position within the organization resembles those on-phone staff members more than the executive class to whom they report. Mills (1966) states this clearly, arguing that "[i]n terms of property, the white-collar people are *not* 'in between Capital and Labor'; they are in exactly the same property-class position as the wage-workers" (100). Yet, as salaried employees with higher incomes, who supervise, organize, and perhaps also dominate the wage-workers, their position within the organization is a conflicted one.<sup>4</sup> To complicate matters more, even at the time at which Mills wrote (the early 1950s) he had already observed "a narrowing of the income gap between wage-workers and white-collar employees" (*Ibid*: 101).

Huws and Dahlmann argue that the "general decline in blue-collar occupations" and accompanying increase in the number of white collar jobs might appear to reflect "class shifts" in the Western world, but the reality is far more complicated. The authors point to the variety of class locations ascribed to white collar workers, noting that there is "...little agreement about the class position of office workers. Do they form a 'white collar proletariat?....Do they form part of a new technical-professional middle class with ambiguous allegiances?" (2009: 9). The ways in which these "ambiguous allegiances" are played out amongst the lowest levels of the management structure are of particular

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<sup>4</sup> As Wright (1985) explains, "[w]hile the wage-labour exchange is important [for classification purposes] various other dimensions of production relations bear on the determination of class relations" (39).

importance to my own research. As Huws and Dahlmann find, workers with ambiguous class locations are unlikely to be able to formulate a coherent critique of the class system in which they are located and even less likely to mobilize if they do not have an objective basis for solidarity with other workers, or if this objective basis is not apparent to them (Ibid: 18).

My theoretically informed questions are: what are the specific, unique working conditions of lower level managers? To what extent do lower level managers align themselves with capital and what do they perceive to be the relevance of collective action for their industry? Finally, to what do lower level managers attribute problems in the workplace, if not to exploitative working conditions?

### ***Lower Level Managers***

Winson and Leach (2002) maintain that class analysis is still relevant in a world where “[d]espite technological advances, capitalism continues to rely on certain kinds of labour to sustain profits...” (5). The authors make a compelling argument for, as they put it, “the continued salience of class analysis,” noting that recent technological changes, rather than improving the lives of workers, have actually only increased the mobility of capital, making workers more vulnerable and at a greater disadvantage vis-a-vis corporations who no longer even abide within national boundaries (Ibid).

Some have noted the reluctance of some white collar workers to unionize. Rinehart (2001), for example, suggests that the relatively high wages and good benefits of office workers and professionals may in part “account for the disinclination of professionals to unionize and strike...” (2001: 91). In some cases, white collar work may be constructed as “middle-class” and therefore not requiring unionization. However,

without a union to formulate a counter-discourse to corporate culture and neoliberalism, workers are susceptible to corporate ideology and the devaluing of labour which accompanies it. “Corporate culture” explanations for the problems workers face on the job usually leave them feeling isolated and do not adequately explain the source of conflict, which is the conflict inherent in capitalist enterprise – the conflict between workers’ needs (*human needs*) and profit generation. They may attribute what are actually structural problems to their own personal failings or to interpersonal problems. The success of corporate ideology in post-war Canada has meant an increase in the likelihood that employees individualize negative job experiences rather than viewing them as instances of class antagonism. This coincides with a generalized devaluing of collective action. While at earlier points in Canadian history<sup>5</sup> it may have been possible to speak about the corporation’s responsibilities to its workers, our political imaginary in this regard has been undermined in recent years by a strong corporate ideology about hard work and the values of a meritocracy.

Such “corporate culture” explanations colour lower level managers’ interactions with, and opinions of, on-phone agents. In call centres in the new economy, low level managers are frequently not graduates of business schools, but former phone agents promoted to the level of supervisor, trainer, client service manager, and so on. Once promoted, they face a decision about how to interact with their former workmates – whether to advocate for them or to adopt the typical management stance in favour of intensifying the labour process for on-phone staff. The former option, however, often runs contrary to their responsibilities within the organization, and could have dire

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the ups and downs of the North American labour movement, see Edwards, Richard C. (1979). *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

personal consequences. The resulting antagonisms between workers only make building a vibrant labour movement increasingly unlikely. In addition, as it is often people with leadership potential who are assimilated into the managerial ranks, the prospects for organizing collectively are further undermined.

Vivian Shalla (2007) identifies the development and distribution of management rhetoric and corporate culture in business schools as a significant part of the labour trends which have seen workers in increasingly dire straits over the last three decades. Even students at formerly radical institutions, she argues, are exposed to pro-management rhetoric. Regarding this proliferation of management discourse she writes: “[t]he drift from critical approaches to the study of work has also been exacerbated by the managerial perspective that has been gaining ground in the academic realm with the growth in size and power of business and management schools and programs.” (9). Graduates of these new business schools then disperse and promote “management friendly” perspectives on the labour process. Of course, management friendly ideologies are not new but, as Shalla explains, now students can choose to attend business programs at traditional universities and graduate with no exposure to counter capitalist discourses. According to Rinehart (1987), business schools or executive training courses indoctrinate workers with a profit-oriented discourse. As P.D. Anthony explains (1984), these managerial schools create a united front and an integrated value system among the management strata, ensuring that even those members drawn from the working class are assimilated (261).

Graduates of business schools often become upper level managers or executives in call centres in the new economy. Lower level managers are those situated between

business school graduates and on-phone agents. They usually have little or no formal post-secondary education and generally resemble phone agents in terms of background and what might be termed “cultural capital.” Further, as Mills explains, because “[t]hey have no direct financial tie to the means of production” they resemble the rank and file (1966: 100). But their objective situation within the organization (as part of the “management team,” albeit usually a poorly paid part) demands that they function in many instances in opposition to their former workmates. Lower level managers are at once vital to the “new economy” and unique to it.

The situation is not all grim. As Vallas (1987) asserts, workers “are not passive recipients of organization ideology” (252). Workers without an effective counter discourse to corporate ideology are *more* susceptible to accepting such ideology at face value but they are not incapable of formulating their own critique. At times they are able to resist the pressure from above to conform, to work longer and faster for less pay, and to accept unquestioningly the demands of their supervisors. Marx himself knew that workers were constrained – but not entirely determined – by capitalist ideology (see Hyman, 2006). As Shalla (2007) notes, the work environment is actively produced and reproduced by the people within it and “workers continue to be active agents” in constructing the capital-labour relationship (8). She argues that understanding labour relations requires a materialist perspective – proponents of which hold that people are both given their world and change their world (Ibid: 11). She emphasizes, following Marx, that workers are able to re-make their world and that economic structures are not immutable. Power might be located in the means of production but it is also “contestable and contested by workers in the private and public spheres” (Ibid: 12).



Here, I examine the ways, if any, in which workers actively resist domination in the workplace. Further, I explore the ways workers are complicit or engaged in dominating others as part of the answer to my question about the extent to which low level managers align themselves with capital. Given the erosion of a “workers’ rights” discourse on which call centre employees can draw to make sense of their work lives, what conclusions do they draw about their role in the workplace, and what do they perceive to be the relevance of collective action (in the form of trade unions, for example) for their industry?

This research is vital to the study of call centres because of its specific focus on lower level managers who occupy a unique position in the call centre as both recipients and purveyors of capitalist ideology. According to Marx, the emergence of a group of wage-labourers dedicated to the supervision of other workers was a unique characteristic of capitalism (Livingstone and Managan, 1996: 20). Managers do not own the means of production – rather, ideologically and politically they are compelled to align with the bourgeoisie (*Ibid*: 21). My research contributes to a clearer picture of what it is like to occupy this contradictory social space, of the tension between being economically disenfranchised yet ideologically aligned with capital.

My focus on low level managers is entirely consistent with a Marxist approach. The first stratum of management in contemporary organizations is frequently occupied by people with little formal education. They are likely to remain at the low end of the pay scale with little hope for further promotion unless they manage to advance their education through night classes, online diplomas and the like. Call centres typify the kind of rapid, “McDonaldized” promotion which Schlosser (1998) vilifies in his portrayal of assistant

managers in fast food restaurants in the United States. Schlosser documents the work lives of these assistant managers, who, being classified as “executives” are exempt from receiving overtime pay but whose salaries are so low they often make little more per hour than their hourly crew members (2004: 142).<sup>6</sup> He notes that fast food assistant managers, who often spend most of their time preparing food and mopping floors, can work up to 70 hours a week (*Ibid*). Hourly employees are protected by laws which stipulate the number of hours they can work in a week before they start receiving overtime pay. However, those laws do not extend to employees who are defined as “executives” or “managers.” As Edwards (1979) tells us, the “Fair Employment Practices Act defines...what constitutes overtime for *nonsupervisory* employees” (161, emphasis mine). Those employees classified as supervisors are vulnerable to demands to work many hours of overtime without extra pay.

Call centre managers also may experience considerable pressure to work long hours and because they are salaried, they receive no extra compensation for doing so. In some cases, their take home pay may be little more than on-phone staff members who receive sales incentives and overtime pay. In many instances their work day affords them much more freedom and flexibility than those taking calls (who must remain at their computer terminals for the duration of their shifts). However, lower level managers are often compelled to collude with corporate aims and goals. Their economic dependence upon the organization ensures that they will comply or risk being fired. Thus their more flexible schedule may give the illusion of autonomy, security, and status, but they will likely experience their work life as coercive and unrewarding.

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<sup>6</sup> See also Royle (2002), who documents the same trends in the UK. Royle finds that restaurant managers at McDonald’s restaurants around the UK routinely worked 12-hour shifts.

Richard Edwards argues that low level managers are controlled by the highly bureaucratic nature of contemporary organizations (1979: 21). Whereas early capitalist enterprises were ruled personally by owners and one or two foremen, the sheer scale of organizations today requires level upon level of managers who must themselves be coordinated and controlled. This is largely accomplished by bureaucratic rule, which institutionalizes company policy, to which managers are as accountable as workers. The difference between the highest echelons of corporate power and the lower levels can hardly be overstated. As Rinehart (1987) declares, “[i]n the capitalist organization, a considerable differentiation of authority emerges, ranging from top executives of giant corporations, who often blend into the capitalist class, to middle managers and low-level supervisors, subject to subordination themselves” (101). My research will explore the extent to which members of these lower levels of management align themselves ideologically with capital, as evidenced in part by their attitudes towards on-phone staff, *from whose ranks they themselves were drawn*. Given the typically poor treatment they receive at the hands of executives and their relatively low pay grade, one might imagine that they feel little loyalty to the company itself. Yet, their very economic dependence upon the corporation combined with their structural position within the organization ensures at least outward compliance. In the end, low level managers’ work lives would seem to be on-going negotiations between competing loyalties and interests.

### ***The New Economy***

These tensions are exacerbated by the seeming inability of the labour movement to formulate an adequate response to the changes that took place in the economy in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Winson and Leach (2002) argue that the deliberate

avoidance of unions on the part of corporations (through sub-contracting, and so on) and the fragmentation of the working class through irregular schedules and plant restructuring has had a harmful effect on the labour movement in general and rendered some particular unions in disarray (25, 31). The erosion of the manufacturing sector, the volatility of resource extraction work and the concomitant expansion of the private service sector have radically transformed union density, attitudes towards the labour movement, and the work (and even social) lives of Canadians.<sup>7</sup> The rapidly expanding private service sector is mainly comprised of non-unionized jobs, which means that most of the new jobs created in Canada are not union jobs. In many cases this may mean that they are low-paid, tenuous, and de-skilled. The new economy is marked by an increase in part-time, temporary, and contract work, so that working parents increasingly find themselves balancing two or more jobs to make ends meet. Winson and Leach (2002) explain that such casual or 'nonstandard' labour is often poorly remunerated and does not include benefits or pensions (10). Livingstone and Sawchuk (2004) indicate that the particular "polarization of employment hours" endemic to the rapidly expanding service sector creates both "overwork and underemployment" for workers (7).

Rosemary Warskett (2007) (among others) argues that the response of the Canadian labour movement to these changes has been piecemeal and uncoordinated (381). According to her, the ensuing crisis of legitimacy for unions and the labour movement in general has not been much improved by "recent union organizing efforts"

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<sup>7</sup> In her review of the literature identifying the impact of service work on workers' identities, Leidner (2006) writes: "[i]n the most advanced economies, the decline in manufacturing jobs and rise in service jobs continue apace, and service workers often face different kinds of challenges to the self than do manufacturing workers" (425). According to the research Leidner reviews, the new economy is characterized by constant technological change and emerging management styles that seek to control workers' "subjectivities" as much as their bodies (*Ibid*).

(*Ibid*: 386). Cayo Sexton's (2003) analysis of the American labour movement is equally disheartening. She argues that the legitimacy of the labour left has been attacked by anti-union corporations since the 1950s and has been seriously eroded since the 1970s (318-319). Writing in 1991, Sexton maintains that "union decline is caused, not by excessive wage demands, but by employer efforts to repress unionism and employer inspired labor laws that allow them to do so" (*Ibid*: 319). However, she also emphasizes that *complacent or non-radical labour* has greatly discredited the labour left in the eyes of Americans. As evidence, she cites the "disrepute in the United States of the word 'socialism' even in association with the word 'democratic'..." (*Ibid*: 322). In 2002, Royle finds the same thing, noting that "[u]nion membership in the US is reckoned to be the lowest in the Western world..." (2002: 67). He contends that unions themselves are partly to blame, since they "have not always been willing to focus adequate resources on recruitment" in the newer industries (*Ibid*). Hence, it would seem unlikely that a resurgence in union organizing is forthcoming. There are certainly significant differences between the American picture, and the situation here in Canada. Each country has its own constellation of factors contributing to union decline and economic restructuring. However, to the extent that many of the larger unions extend across the border, it is instructive to note what American researchers have found in regards to their own circumstances.

In Canada, it is apparent that fewer and fewer people find themselves in stable, well-paying jobs, and yet, are increasingly questioning the relevance of the labour movement to their lives. Unionism and a discourse of workers' rights are associated with blue-collar manual work – and office workers have often considered these things

irrelevant or worse, undesirable.<sup>8</sup> As Warskett argues, “[t]he failure of the Canadian labour movement to break through and substantially organize the private service sector by the 1980s meant that neo-liberal restructuring proceeded during the late 1980s and 1990s without much hindrance from the labour movement” (389). Serious attempts have been made to organize some groups in the private service sector at different points throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but these efforts have often met with strong, coordinated resistance from employers (Clark and Warskett, 2010). Attempts to unionize McDonald’s and Eaton’s employees during the 1980s and 1990s were frustrated by high rates of employee turnover, the fragmented nature of the labour force, and in some cases, “the aggressive anti-union strategies” of the owners (*Ibid*: 241). Decades earlier, the Bank Employees Association had faced similar employer resistance to unionization during their efforts to organize bank workers in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In that instance, Clark and Warskett note, “strong employer opposition quickly ended the drive” (*Ibid*).

Neo-liberal policies and ideologies continue apace, therefore, and their impact on the structure of the private service sector is difficult to overstate. In some ways, the logic of neo-liberalism and rationalization of workplaces has achieved a “common sense” status that has perhaps been detrimental to my research participants’ ability to articulate a comprehensive anti-capitalist stance. Rather than identifying the structural conflicts in their workplace, I suspect that they are more apt to identify interpersonal problems as the source of their dissatisfaction, which the individualistic tendencies of neo-liberalism and

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<sup>8</sup> There are, of course, professional associations for lawyers and engineers and public sector unions. Those professionals who have embraced unionization as a way to address shrinking wages and the rationalization of their work may be said to have resisted “traditional anti-union biases that sometimes predominate outside of blue collar groups” (Duffy and Pupo, 1992: 227). In Canada, the health care industry in particular is well-unionized and has been the site of several well-publicized battles between the Service Employees International and the Canadian Union of Public Employees. My specific focus does not extend to public sector or professionals’ unions, although understanding how such unions have flourished in a context of generalized union losses would be a fruitful line of inquiry for further research.

rationalization tend to encourage. Further, I expect that low level managers in call centres primarily align themselves with capital, as evidenced by their treatment of on-phone staff and general lack of support for collective action. These patterns would be consistent with their unique position within the call centre, halfway between workers and owners.

The particular irony of this situation is that many (workers and researchers alike) have noted the similarities between call centre work and factory work. Far from being the clean, high-skill, high-tech jobs they are often touted to be by local governments who seek to attract call centres as part of job creation programs, call centre jobs often feel a lot like being on an assembly line and may also be hazardous to employees' health. In Belt, Richardson, and Webster's (2000) description of call centre work, it becomes clear that when their pace of work is controlled by a computer, employees experience a great deal of stress. In call centres, computers automatically send calls to phone agents' head sets and the agents have no control over when a call will come through or which calls to take. As Belt, Richardson, and Webster tell us, their research participants "talked of the lack of stimulation involved in these jobs and some identified similarities between the call centre environment and the factory assembly-line....The managers and supervisors interviewed recognized that the demanding, yet also highly standardized nature of the job was a key cause of employee demotivation and high labour turnover" (*Ibid*: 373). Several of the workers indicated that call centre management jobs in particular are very demanding (*Ibid*: 379). Workers found that they were expected to put in long hours, which they considered especially strenuous for women who also bear the lion's share of childrearing. Similarly, Rinehart (1986) argues that white collar jobs "which once were viewed as an

escape from factory labour, have turned out to bear a strong resemblance to blue-collar work” (67).

My research explores more than workers’ views on unionism and delves into call centre workers’ perceptions of a range of questions that are salient to labour studies. In truth, just as Marx did, I view trade unions to be, at best, a tepid indicator of the health of the labour movement.<sup>9</sup> While they improved the lot of miners, garment workers, and steel workers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they failed to provide a fundamental challenge to the rights of management to direct and control the work process. Indeed, at different points in history, workers have had to battle just as hard against their own conservative union leaders as against management to achieve a strike (Rinehart, 1987: 111).

Unions themselves cannot adequately address management authoritarianism, they can only temper management dominance of the work process (*Ibid.* 121). However, as Rinehart (1987) explains, unionism does entail a public acknowledgement of “the existence of a structural conflict at the workplace...” and the need for collective action to address this conflict (*Ibid.*). Sexton (2003) surmises that “unions, fallible as they are, provide an essential check on the runaway powers of economic elites” (325). My purpose in including interview questions about the perceived relevance of unions in my interviews is to use unionism as a starting point to open a dialogue on workers’ rights and

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<sup>9</sup> Hyman (2006) explains that “...Marx largely discounted the economic potential of trade unions” (44). According to Hyman, Marx maintained that “unions could only partially withstand” capitalism’s constant attack on workers’ wages (*Ibid.*). Further, Marx (and later Lenin) held that unions tend, over time, to become conservative since they are forced to organize “on terrain shaped by the existing capitalist society” (*Ibid.* 45). The terms of the conflict between trade unions and capitalists is reduced to battles over the conditions of work, and not over the larger issue of ownership of the mode of production. Hyman argues that earlier enthusiasm among labour analysts for the political puissance of unions must now be called into question, noting that “union membership and effectiveness are in decline in almost all countries where unions were formerly strong...” (*Ibid.*).



possibilities for resistance and collective action. In short, I believed at the outset of my research that the legitimacy of the labour movement has been so eroded in the eyes of most Canadian workers that any discussion of workers' rights would need to be facilitated by a "conceptual handle." Trade unionism provided just such a handle and opened up the discussion to other (more radical) aspects of workers' rights.

Whatever the position of the labour movement today, it is clear that at one time it was strong enough to provide Canadian workers with a more comprehensive anti-capitalist discourse. For example, Edwards (1979) tells us that a 1919-1920 steel strike, led by a "maturing labour movement" with specifically socialist aims, questioned not just wages but production itself (19). Before this, he argues, "[t]he rising tide of working class militancy" prevented capitalists from consolidating completely and in turn threatened capital's hegemonic rule (*Ibid*: 47). The structure of the factory provided a clear distinction between workers and bosses, an "us and them" dynamic which is perhaps less in evidence in the contemporary workplace (*Ibid*: 147-148). By contrast, service work requires employees to undergo a personality make-over far more than factory work<sup>10</sup> so that much of a worker's performance is based on their perceived willingness to work and an antithetical attitude to the boss is squeezed out. In some ways, workers may come to identify with management and hope to gain a place among them. Finally, Edwards tells us, "[w]orking class orientations and patterns of interacting yield to more bureaucratic, so-called middle class ways...The workers' ability to create a workday culture begins to

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<sup>10</sup> On the question of work and identity, Leidner (2006) points out that work can sometimes support workers' efforts to build a coherent identity. "But whether work enhances or undermines self-respect, status, and dignity," she argues, "depends on the specifics of the work [and] its social organization" (*Ibid*: 435).

fade, just as, on a grander level, the working class loses its ability to make its own class culture” (Ibid: 148).

Of course, leftist researchers should be wary of descriptions of a reputed “golden age” of working class militancy and cohesion. Yet, the very difficulty I faced (as explained above and subsequently in chapter three) in wording interview questions to try and “get at” the various aspects of class consciousness of call centre workers in Canada today speaks volumes about the crisis of legitimacy that the labour movement is facing today. This crisis is perhaps reflected in mainstream cultural forms, where working class culture is frequently devalued or denied in popular culture, the news media, and in workplaces.<sup>11</sup>

In part, my research shows that not all is lost – workers can resist corporate ideology and are doing so in a number of ways. Specifically, the 2008 recession prompted a backlash against irresponsible corporations and mismanagement by elites of public and private resources, and this is ongoing. However, workplaces have changed radically since the heyday of the labour movement. As Winson and Leach (2002), citing Belous (1989), claim, earlier forms of work organization (like the ‘new deal’ of the 1930s) at least paid lip service to the notion of employee input, “whereas in the contingent model unions play only a small, peripheral role” (10). The labour movement has seemingly been unable to address these changes, leaving workers without a comprehensive anti-management discourse to draw on to explain their lived reality. The

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<sup>11</sup> Livingstone and Sawchuk (2004) write that it is “rare in dominant discourses to hear any reference to social classes” (8). The notion that we live in a class society is rarely addressed in dominant cultural forms. “While much attention is paid to the exploits of the rich and famous,” Livingstone and Sawchuk tell us, the rest of us are assumed to belong to a broad middle class. The lived reality for most working people (long working weeks, juggling paid and non-paid work, with little leisure time and even less disposable income) is rarely depicted in a straightforward way in popular media. Hyman (2006) puts it succinctly: “Today, capitalism is hegemonic and alternatives....are remote from popular imagination” (47)

21<sup>st</sup> century, with all of its technological advances, has not meant the end of bad jobs.

Robert Howard (1985) decisively demonstrates that the most sophisticated workplaces in Silicon Valley can be just as hazardous to workers' health as modern factories. Yet, the labour movement has not developed into the kind of organizing power necessary to transform labour relations, beyond battling over wage hikes and vacation time.

Hence, the issue of reinvigorating working class communities, organizations, and trade unions is even more pressing in the new economy, despite its technological advances. Discussions of contemporary forms of employment and work organization, like the emerging call centre industry, would be remiss not to include considerations of the relative paucity of working class organizing now as compared to the heyday of the labour movement. Young people entering the workforce for the first time, older workers adapting to a changing economy, and women returning to work to supplement a spouse's income now often face a harsh economic climate alone, in a newly individualized work atmosphere.

Whatever its relative merits or failings, the call centre has emerged as an important part of the Canadian economy. In 2005, Akyeampong, writing for the Statistics Canada periodical *Perspectives*, identifies the "business support services" sector (of which call centres are "a major component") as one of the fastest growing sectors in Canada between 1987 to 2004 (5). In 2004, this sector employed 112,000 Canadians (*Ibid*). This is in part due to changes in telecommunications and information technology and changes in business practices leading to an increase in outsourcing (*Ibid*).

In addition, the Canadian economy continues to undergo transformations which make manufacturing jobs scarcer. Increased levels of post-secondary education among

Canadians since WWII have not eradicated the need for unskilled, readily available employment.<sup>12</sup> Many Canadians find it necessary to support themselves or supplement a spouse's income with low-level service sector jobs for a variety of reasons, including displacement from the manufacturing sector, re-entry into the labour force after caring for children, and the scarcity of jobs for students. These are the structural conditions under which the call centre has emerged and flourished. Given the call centre's relative newness as an industry, its spread to both the public sector in the west and also to other nations (often with very different wage and compensation packages than their western counterparts), it is not surprising that there has been growing interest in it among sociologists. My hope is that my research will contribute to an understanding of the specific, unique perspective of lower level managers in call centres, which may also give us some insight into the larger issue of the vitality of labour discourses in the new economy.

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<sup>12</sup> I do not refer to call centre jobs as "unskilled" to suggest that no skills are necessary to do the job, but to distinguish them from "trades" jobs, which generally require workers to undergo formalized training prior to taking up the job. Livingstone and Sawchuk (2004) explain the difference between trades and "production" jobs, stating, "[t]radesmen generally have more organized training and apprenticeship opportunities...as well as more continuing discretionary control over the pace of their work..." (64). See also Hyman (2006) for a discussion of the gradual eradication of "good" jobs through mechanization and the division of labour to maximize profit and minimize the need for "relatively expensive and relatively autonomous" craft labour (37-38). For a discussion of the real skills of call centre workers, especially voice modulation, attentive listening, prolonged concentration, call control, and multi-tasking, see Hanna (2010).

## Unionizing the Service Sector What We Already Know About Call Centres and Unions

Call centres emerged during a period of rapid technological innovation and expansion of the service sector, along with an associated contraction of the manufacturing sector in the West. Factory jobs, subject to elimination through automation, off-shoring, and economic downturn have become increasingly scant in North America and elsewhere, leaving many families scrambling to compensate for the loss of a living wage. The call centre functions as a source of ready, relatively low-skill employment in regions of high unemployment. However, the wages of call centre workers do not approximate those of most factory workers, in part because the industry is not widely unionized. While several researchers (see in particular Lerner, 2002 and Belt, Richardson and Webster, 2000) have noted the similarities between telephone jobs in the call centre and factory jobs on the assembly line, these similarities do not extend to the relatively stable wages and working conditions that characterized the heyday of big manufacturing in North America.

Much of the existing research on call centres focuses on measuring job satisfaction variables, such as employee performance monitoring, time allowed off the phones, and so on. This kind of quantitative work is useful, since performance monitoring and other methods of controlling the work process contribute to the deeply alienating conditions many call centre workers face. For example, Holman, Chissick, and Totterdell (2002) find that when performance monitoring is perceived to be intense, it contributes to greater levels of exhaustion and “that greater effort and attention is given to tasks that may normally be performed effortlessly” (75). But research that concentrates on ameliorating existing working conditions without taking a holistic view of white collar

work in the new economy is severely limited. In addition, as discussed above, there is too little research on low level managers, who frequently come from working class backgrounds, with little formal education and few employment options outside of the call centre. Low level managers often work long hours for little pay and their jobs offer little in the way of personal satisfaction or autonomy. They frequently find themselves in the position of monitoring and managing their erstwhile peers. Throughout their workday, low level managers may confront situations that force them to choose between aligning themselves with their much more highly paid executive-level supervisors or with on-phone staff (knowing that this latter option could potentially jeopardize their jobs). Caught in the ongoing clash of interests between executives and on-phone staff, low level managers might resemble on-phone staff in terms of income and ownership of the means of production, but the requirements of their job (surveillance and supervision of phone agents) discourages any form of solidarity between them and the production staff.

My research will examine the unique position that low level managers occupy within the contemporary workplace. While low level managers (and their dilemmas) are not unique to the call centre industry, the call centre is the perfect venue for this research because it has become a common source of ready employment for so many and because call centres often promote from within. This means that the people who occupy positions in the lower echelons in the call centre are less likely than those in other industries (that do not promote from within) to have business degrees or a great deal of previous management experience. Here, I will examine the existing literature on call centres as well as the unique objective position of lower level managers, and consider these in

relation to the broader issues of class solidarity in the new economy and the health of the Canadian labour movement.

### *Life in the Call Centre*

If call centres are broadly accepted as ready forms of clean, safe employment in Canada, critical research does much to trouble this image. Since call centres have traditionally located in depressed areas and, very often, areas struggling in the wake of factory closures, the industry has sometimes been constructed as an opportunity for youth to surpass their parents' own career aspirations – to get off the assembly line and into a comfortable office chair. But the reality of life in the call centre is far from comfortable.<sup>1</sup> For example, Belt, Richardson, and Webster's research participants consistently emphasised the "similarities between the call centre environment and the factory assembly-line" (2000: 373). Workers are expected to follow a script which will standardize their interactions with customers, and they described the work as both "repetitive" and "tiring" (*Ibid*). Interestingly, the managers that Belt, Richardson, and Webster interviewed readily acknowledged that the on-phone work is at once "highly standardized" but also demands a great deal of concentration (*Ibid*). That is, similar to work on the assembly line, while the work itself is monotonous, there is no opportunity to "daydream" or to let one's mind wander. The authors find that call centres experience high rates of employee turnover, and that these difficult working conditions contribute to this state of affairs (*Ibid*). Significantly, however, those managers who described the demanding nature of the working conditions saw no reason to try to change the

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<sup>1</sup> Hanna (2010) finds that workers are initially attracted to call centre work by the flexible working hours (270). The reality, however, is that the very "flexibility" can become burdensome. The call centre's operating hours are determined by the client based on customer call-in habits. Workers' shifts can change frequently with little notice. In addition, the manner in which shifts are allocated (whether by seniority or on a first-come, first-served basis) can also change without notice.

conditions (Ibid). Indeed, they were constructed as an inevitable part of life in the call centre.

If the call centre is similar to a factory because the work is monotonous, Richardson and Gillespie (2003) argue that it is also similar to a factory because the same process of automation which leads to the deskilling and degradation of workers in the manufacturing sector is present in the call centre (89). This process of automation ensures that work is less and less dependent on the skill of the worker. Like the modern factory, the labour process is standardized, accurately timed, and relies on the “much enhanced application of technology” (Ibid: 90). Call centres that move in where traditional industries are in decline, as Richardson and Gillespie (2003) and Vincent and McKeown (2008) argue they do, avail themselves of large labour pools accustomed to this kind of highly automated work.

Rather than highlighting the similarities of the call centre to a factory, McFarland emphasises the call centre industry’s reliance on the availability of a large pool of women who need ready employment to support their families and concludes that, if anything, the call centre resembles the maquiladoras in Mexico, arguing that both rely on vulnerable labour - the labour of young women who are unlikely to organize and unlikely to become militant (2002: 70). Rather, they accept poor working conditions and low wages precisely because of their marginal position in the labour force.<sup>2</sup> While certain trade unions have made inroads in New Brunswick call centres, McFarland argues that the lack of unionization in this area is what attracted the call centres in the first place and “conflict

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<sup>2</sup> Notably, Leidner (2006) turns this theory on its head, confirming that corporations do in fact take into consideration the availability of supposedly tractable and submissive female workers when choosing where to locate, but arguing that these employers in turn recreate and reify such enactments of femininity, as workers respond to management demands and expectations (449).



seems inevitable as tensions build between the union and the companies...” (Ibid: 72). Like McFarland, Larner (2002) criticizes the expansion of the call centre industry in eastern Canada because, although it has created many jobs, it has not “created jobs for those people displaced from more traditional resource based industries. Rather, it has created a new stratum of low end positions for young people, particularly young women, who would otherwise be working in tourism, retail or food services...” (145).<sup>3</sup> Call centres, Larner argues, “foster low wage and feminized forms of employment” (Ibid: 133). Belt, Richardson, and Webster (2000) similarly note the overrepresentation of women in call centres. The women they interviewed indicated that they felt it is easier for women to be promoted in call centres than in other industries, but the authors did not find evidence of women being promoted beyond the level of supervisor (378-379).

Richardson and Gillespie (2003) do not directly address the issue of promotions for women – rather they focus on the class division between internal and external hires. What they find is that there is a glass ceiling for internal hires at the supervisor and middle manager level (102). This means that those promoted from on-phone positions typically become supervisors or occupy low level positions in the Human Resources department, for example. The truly high paying, influential jobs are usually given to those with business degrees, good connections, or many years of experience in more prestigious organizations.

Holman, Chissick, and Totterdell (2002) conclude that the rapid promotion-from-within which characterizes the private service sector, and call centres in particular, can

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that many women juggle multiple jobs, often working one job during the week and another on the weekends (Duffy and Pupo, 1992: 63). Multiple job-holding can also take the form of seasonal work combined with part-time work year-round. Among women, multiple job-holding “mushroom[ed]” during the 1980s and 1990s, according to Duffy and Pupo, reflecting in part the general inadequacy of the wage rates for part-time work and the scarcity of full-time work (Ibid).

cause acute stress for workers who are insufficiently prepared for their new role.

Inadequate training, long hours, and high expectations combine to create taxing work conditions.<sup>4</sup> Holman, Chissick, and Totterdell argue that inadequate training of new low level managers “can lead to a situation where new supervisors have to deal with sensitive issues (such as giving feedback on performance) under demanding conditions, but are relatively inexperienced and ill equipped to cope with such tasks” (77).

The inadequate training of internally-promoted managers creates problems for both the managers and on-phone staff. In her study, McFarland (2002) reports that workers questioned the competence of their supervisors (67). They felt that managers pressured them and they complained of the heavy workload, high quotas, and the stress associated with these (*Ibid*: 67-68). Yet, the flip side of this rapid promotion structure was that these same workers felt their opportunities for advancement were good because others with the same qualifications and background had already been promoted (*Ibid*: 67).

Due to stressful working conditions, call centres experience high turnover even at the management level, resulting in a new cycle of promoting from within. Indeed, call centres could not function without this relatively deskilled labour to fill the vast array of low-paying management positions it fosters. It is the objectionable nature of the working conditions that requires so many lower level managers to ensure that the (inevitable) resistance to the working conditions does not get out of hand.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the negative impacts of work on health, see Polanyi, Michael. (2004). “Understanding and Improving the Health of Work” in Dennis Raphael, ed., *Social Determinants of Health*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, Inc., Hyman (2006), and Leidner (2006).

### ***Low Level Managers: New Employees for a New Economy***

In his landmark text on the changing world of work in post-war America, C. Wright Mills constructs an image of the lower level manager as adapting to a world where there is both room for promotion through the ranks, but also a great deal of class segmentation and striation – remnants of a time when to be middle class, one had to have either property or standing as a mercantile. In the new economy, Mills tells us, the expansion and bureaucratization of business requires a new middle class, frequently drawn from the ranks of production staff, but “shaped” by their superiors to be capable of managing the rank and file (1966: 106). These new managers, Mills writes, are “people to whom subordinates report, and who in turn report to superiors” (*Ibid*: 97). They have “borrowed” the prestige of the old middle classes and are keen to distinguish themselves from the lower rungs of the organization (*Ibid*: 103). They accomplish this through their appearance (i.e. not wearing a uniform), through their skills, and the manner in which they acquire these skills (i.e. especially through close contact with superiors) (*Ibid*). Additionally, they take pride in their relative autonomy on the job, vis-à-vis production staff.

However, the entire picture is not this straightforward. The lower level manager’s role in the organization is an inherently conflicted and contradictory one. They are not quite production staff, and may be vilified by production staff because of their newly acquired authority to supervise and surveil other workers. But neither are they accepted into the ranks of the “top brass.” Mills explains that “in terms of income” they may be better off than wage-workers but they are just as dependent as wage-workers on the organization for that income since they “have no serious expectations of propertied

independence” (*Ibid*: 105). Low level managers may distinguish themselves “psychologically” from the rank and file by claiming more prestige but their characters are shaped by the demands of the new bureaucratic organization (*Ibid*). Mills sums up the objective position of such worker, noting: “[w]hite collar employees are the assistants of authority; the power they exercise is a derived power but they do exercise it” (*Ibid*: 104).

Writing more than three decades later, Rinehart (1987) finds much the same trend, only heightened by the emergence of computerized work. He argues that the newly technical workplace is subject to rationalization and intensification, where work is monitored by “a virtual army of low-level supervisors [who] ensure that the pace and atmosphere of office work is neither leisurely nor relaxed” (1987: 80). The kinds of technological advances which made measuring output and work pace easier in the factory are rampant in the new office. Computers monitor time workers spend away from the phone, time they spend on each call, the number of phone calls handled, and so on (*ibid*: 87). In a direct reverberation of Mills’ earlier sentiment, Rinehart states that low level managers exercise some degree of control over wage-workers and are in turn subject to “subordination” and “direct scrutiny and control from executives above” (*Ibid*: 101, 105). In the newly rationalized office, computers control the pace of work, rather than the worker herself, just as in any factory. However, unlike the factory, where wages were once more likely to keep pace with inflation, Rinehart argues that “...clerical wages have suffered a long-term relative decline” (84).<sup>5</sup>

In part, this is because although white collar work has come to resemble factory work, there has been no accompanying rise in unionization (*Ibid*: 89). Rinehart argues

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<sup>5</sup> Ed Finn, in a 2011 paper for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), points out that while Canada as a nation has more than doubled its GDP since the 1970s, the gap between the richest and poorest of the country has only widened.

that union membership threatens white collar workers' status and gives their jobs even more the flavour of being manual, blue-collar labour (90). According to Rinehart, white collar workers absorb the anti-union sentiment of the upper ranks of managers and executive staff, most of whom are drawn from the ranks of elite business school graduates.

Therefore, although office work in the newly bureaucratized organization resembles factory work in many ways, Edwards (1979) suggests that the 'us and them' dynamic common in factory work has disappeared from the contemporary office workplace.<sup>6</sup> In contemporary workplaces, workers identify with management and hope to gain a place among them. The rapid internal promotion model contributes to this orientation. Edwards maintains that working class cohesiveness was more apparent in early factories (147-148). While it is important not to romanticize the 'glory days' of a vibrant working class culture when certainly working conditions were dangerous and workers competed for a limited number of jobs, Edwards argues that white collar work can be personally invasive in a way that factory work is not. Office work requires an internalization of the values of the corporation, making it almost impossible to perform the work and maintain an anti-management stance (see also Leidner, 2006). In a bureaucratic environment, compliance, punctuality, attendance, and a "sustained propensity" to follow the rules are emphasized (1979: 149). The ultimate expression of this kind of bureaucratic control is internalization of corporate values, resulting in self-governance and loyalty to the company itself (*Ibid*: 150). This loyalty can persist through

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<sup>6</sup> Tony Royle echoes this sentiment 23 years later, in his study of McDonald's managers in the UK. He maintains that McDonald's employees are encouraged to remain loyal to the corporation through the fostering "of a new form of collective" (2002: 64). In this new arrangement, "us" refers to the employees, and "them" refers to the customers.

a multitude of personal disappointments in terms of promotions, bonuses, and wage increases. Employees who have seen their real wages decline over the years and remained loyal to the organization may have internalized the needs and goals of the company (*Ibid*). Edwards argues that for hourly workers, punctuality and rule-following are emphasized while for salaried workers, loyalty and enthusiasm are rewarded, but the significant point is that both hourly staff and low level managers are subject to the personality overhaul demanded by the contemporary workplace.

Anthony (1984) argues that when workers internalize the goals of the organization, explicit coercion and other more obvious forms of control are no longer necessary (258). By constructing hard work as intrinsically worthwhile, capitalist ideology makes appeals to work harder unnecessary (*Ibid*: 259). Far from being exempt from capitalist ideology, Anthony argues that lower level managers are its especial recipients. He claims that "[t]he ideological onslaught is now almost entirely directed at managers and is no longer composed of a naïve...appeal for hard work" (*Ibid*: 260). The contemporary workplace has been the breeding ground for "...a whole mass of techniques designed to measure, monitor, control, and reward managers' performance" (*Ibid*). He argues that "...ideology plays a very considerable part in the curricula of management courses at universities, polytechnics, technical colleges and industrial staff colleges" (1984: 260). Managerial schools ensure management strata have a united front and an integrated value system and they give scientific credence to exploitation of the workforce (*Ibid*: 261). In this way, managers can become "so insulated" from working class culture and workers' rights discourses that they find it hard to imagine these as legitimate views (*Ibid*: 262).

In 2006, Hyman identifies the same trends, arguing that in the contemporary organization, employers must deploy “subtle” and coercive forms of control precisely because of workers’ continued (rational) resistance to methods of profit maximization and work intensification (41). By orienting workers to the goals of the organization and eliciting their cooperation, the employer relies less on expensive, unwieldy, and imperfect forms of technological control. According to Hyman, “[m]anagement strategy [is] .... an attempt by employers to impose control while still evoking consent, with both elements of this contradictory set of objectives conditioned by the actual and potential recalcitrance of their employees” (*Ibid*). The result is that the contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production are internalized by the workers, and played out inside the hearts and minds of workers themselves. They are less likely to embody simple, direct opposition to the forces that constrain them. Rather, they both oppose and consent to such forces and, as my research suggests, are capable of constructing (or subscribing to) rationales for imposing the same kinds of constraints on fellow workers.

Like Anthony, Shalla (2007) traces the consolidation of a renewed and reinvigorated capitalist ideology back to the profusion of management schools in North America. According to Shalla, the shift to a newly bureaucratized and rationalized management style is enhanced by the proliferation of business schools and management training programs which entrench and legitimize capitalist ideology. Business school graduates often occupy the upper echelons of organizations, from where they propagate ‘management friendly’ ideology which demands that workers conform to lean production principles. Workers are expected to become more flexible and to work in more precarious circumstances for less pay (2007: 9). The newly legitimated capitalist ideology, freed

from its fetters of working class cohesion and militancy, has created “deeper levels of insecurity for scores of labour force participants” (*Ibid*). Perhaps one of the most significant labour gains to have been eradicated is that of the family wage (*Ibid*). The resulting emergence of women into the labour force in steadily increasing numbers may have contributed to women’s participation in a greater variety of work, but it has also had widespread consequences for childcare and family life which public policy is still grappling with today.

According to Edwards (1979) the contemporary organization could not function without this hegemonic discourse of hard work and personal sacrifice (58-61). Welfare capitalism and widespread unionism de-legitimated direct exploitation, but did not eradicate the need for capitalists to exploit workers to maximize profits. Thus, Taylorism, scientific management and worker participation plans were designed as evolving attempts to control workers more subtly. In conjunction with the new work ethic, these methods encouraged workers to identify with the organization, while simultaneously consolidating in workers’ minds the authority of executives to shape and control the work process.

### ***Responding to the Changes: Unionism and the Labour Left***

Even in the manufacturing sector, unionism has been largely unable to address the fundamental conflicts of capitalist production. Howard (1985) argues that because collective agreements codify management rights along with workers’ rights, they actually normalize the existence of managers; the notion that workers cannot get along without management becomes common sense. By legitimizing management’s relationship to the worker through the collective agreement, trade unions “ceased to challenge the fundamental premise of corporate management” (1985: 98). According to Howard, even



the most militant union fails to make work democratic or to challenge the management prerogative (Ibid: 184). Issues such as “design of technology, the organization of work, patterns of supervision, and attitudes of office supervisors” significantly impact workers’ quality of work life, but there is no room on the bargaining table for them (Ibid: 187). The opposite is more often the case: to the extent that management and labour must agree on everything on the bargaining table, collective agreements can only achieve the lowest common denominator (Ibid: 195).

Many others have documented the tendency of North American unions to become conservative and complacent (Rinehart, 1987; Cayo Sexton, 2003). Rinehart (1987) claims that workers have often had to battle temperate union leaders to get a strike mandate (111). Indeed, in the ‘50s and ‘60s, some of the big unions like UAW were staunchly anti-communist and opposed to left-leaning activists and sympathetic intellectuals joining the union movement (Lichtenstein, 2010). And again, in the aftermath of the deep recession of the 1990s, strikes became less frequent, as unions retreated to defensive positions, struggling even to maintain their ground (Rinehart, 2001: 5). Clark and Warskett argue that employers began to rely more on contract and temporary labour to avoid union organizing efforts, making it extremely difficult to build the solidarity and cohesion among workers necessary for unionization (2010: 246). Unionizing efforts are on-going, but the service sector in particular remains vulnerable to precarious and fragmented forms of work, making traditional forms of collective action arduous (ibid).

Edwards (1979) argues that the large corporations that emerged in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were better equipped to stamp out worker resistance (15-16). These

larger corporations were more powerful, had fewer constraints and wielded more sophisticated forms of control in response to changes in worker opposition and public perceptions of workers' rights (*Ibid*: 15-18). According to Edwards, this stage of rapid industrial growth in postwar America led to periods of "intensifying conflict" by the 1970s (*Ibid*: 18). Edwards claims that capital accumulation is not immune to historical forces. It is different from one decade to the next, depending on, for example, the degree of competition among capitalists, the level of class consciousness among workers, and the various government policies shaping and impacting the market (1979: 15).

The same can be said for the strength of the labour movement. What is considered possible, desirable, or worthwhile at one time is impossible, risky, or doomed to fail at another. Secombe and Livingstone (2000) argue that whether or not workers see collective action as viable depends on their belief that this action will be successful, rather than the intensity of their discontent (8). In terms of the decline of the labour left in our own time, the authors contend that corrupted labour leaders delegitimized the labour movement in workers' eyes, preventing them from viewing collective action as a practical response to on-the-job exploitation (2000: 28)<sup>7</sup>.

But this was not always the case. Edwards (1979) documents the long and varied history of the labour movement, identifying periods of intensifying militancy amongst workers and periods when the labour movement became relatively complacent. He claims

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<sup>7</sup> C. Wright Mills argues that with increasing bureaucratization of work, the public and private sectors become in effect indistinguishable since the very same people populate the upper tiers of both realms (1966: 106 and 112). Two people at war in the boardroom find themselves on the same side of the House of Representatives. And further, "[v]ery slowly, reluctantly, the labor leader in his curious way, during certain phases of the business cycle and union history, joins them" (*Ibid*: 106). Mills' larger point is that it is impossible to draw careful distinctions between those in "government," those in "business," and those running the union – indeed, all too often all three supposedly separate realms are governed by exactly the same people. Indeed, labour leaders and union officials frequently leave the union and move into government jobs or human resources (*Ibid*: 112). In some cases, managing these shifting relationships and competing obligations becomes the "real" goal of each organization.

that when capital increased production demands, workers were sometimes emboldened to strike or even to challenge the real foundations of capital accumulation (*Ibid*: 52). He even identifies a time of growing opposition to capital, when the labour movement took on an explicitly Socialist stance. In 1912, Edwards asserts, the Socialist Party won 6% of the votes in the American presidential election (*Ibid*: 38). Before this, there was widespread public support for striking railway workers in western Canada, resulting in boycotts of the streetcar service (Hildebrand, 2009). The rapidly growing industrial sector changed the dynamics of class conflict in the United States and Canada, ushering in a period of open clashes between employers and workers. For example, the 1919 steel strike challenged not just wages but the fundamentals of capitalist production itself. Edwards attributes this to the “maturing labour movement” and specifically Socialist leadership (1979: 19). Likewise, in the 1920s, the coal miners in Cape Breton, Canada, were led by an “unabashed Communist” in their fight against cuts to their wages (Haiven, 2010).

After the chaos and tumult of the Depression and WWII, the labour left was influenced by the emerging interest in culture, experience, agency, and the “new politics” of identity. Consequently, one of the main tasks for the labour left throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s was adjusting to the realities of the “new” left: understanding the complex interplay between agency and determinism and structures and culture (Kirk, 2010). While the labour movement cannot but be strengthened by gender and race analyses, the new left focus on the individual and individualism was detrimental to notions of the importance of class solidarity and working-class unity.<sup>8</sup> Exacerbating these issues were

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<sup>8</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein writes that “[o]rganized labour is embattled, not just at the bargaining table, but in a fundamentally ideological way that calls its very existence into question” (2010: 72). This is precisely

numerous structural shifts which necessitated dramatic changes in the way the labour movement operated (Duffy and Pupo, 1992: 224). In particular, the increase in the number of women in the labour market, the increasing fragmentation of forms of labour, and the relocation of many firms and factories overseas meant that traditional methods for organizing could no longer be relied upon (Ibid).

The strength of capitalist ideology and the strength of the labour movement should not be seen as polar opposites – rather they are related phenomenon, so that one is in ascension while the other is in decline. As Duffy and Pupo suggest, the labour movement is attempting to change in response to the expansion of neoliberal policies, but “these changes are uneven” (Ibid: 224). Few would disagree that the labour movement has, in recent decades, suffered to such an extent that today an explicitly Socialist stance among the rank and file would be almost unimaginable.<sup>9</sup> While it may have been possible for steel workers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to formulate a specifically Socialist critique of their employers, most office workers in Canada at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while not being much better off materially, can only offer vague notions that some of the treatment they have received at the hands of their bosses is unfair.

Edwards (1979) attributes this in part to the codifying of worker resistance in union formation and collective bargaining. The formalization of the relationship between workers and management, Edwards argues, helped pave the way for the bureaucratic organization of work which characterized the post-World War II approach to labour

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where the intellectual left has most to contribute but intellectuals have largely moved on to identity politics and other “post-materialist” concerns. Thus, we have a double retreat from class analyses of both organized labour and the intellectual left, which puts the labour movement (and workers) in jeopardy.

<sup>9</sup> Where loyalty to the union remains, it often takes the form of nostalgia for the male camaraderie of labour’s heyday and the days of the “living wage,” and is probably not an accurate reflection of the actual struggles that real, material gains required.

relations. Bureaucratic control emerged in the wake of the discrediting of welfare capitalism and, according to Edwards, unions welcomed it as a way to enshrine workers' gains in the area of labour relations. Ultimately, however, the formalization of roles and relationships in the workplace alienated workers further from each other, and encouraged workers to "pursue their self-interests in a narrow way as individuals..." (Edwards, 1979: 145).

By the 1980s, capitalist triumphalism coincided with the seeming stagnation of the traditional labour movement, destabilizing the average worker's ability to formulate a specifically anti-capitalist response to their negative job experiences. Shalla (2007) argues that the intellectual left has also been increasingly unwilling to maintain an explicitly Socialist stance in the neo-liberal era. She maintains that just at a time when workers face great uncertainty and those postwar relations which afforded some degree of stability are under attack, academic work on labour and the economy has become less and less critical, having yielded a great deal of space to managerial perspectives and neo-liberal ideology (*Ibid*: 10).

In his study of similar trends in the UK, Kirk (2010) finds that academic work on labour relations has "recently displayed worrying signs of a retreat into conservative insularity" and that academics, wrapped up in the "competitive" and "introverted" institution have not been forging links with the labour left outside of the academy (163). This tendency has prevented the labour movement from broadening and expanding, at a time when the growing service sector requires a vigorous labour movement to organize it. When combined with the recent trend in the academy to focus on culturalism and identity

politics, the result is a steady decline in the prominence of workers' rights discourses both in the academy and the public realm. Argues Kirk,

[t]he decline of socialism, the weakened position of the trade unions and the wider labour movement, the hegemony of neo-liberalism, de-industrialization and the decline of the 'traditional' working class, the ascendancy of consumerist individualism and the rise of 'new' social movements concerned with gender, race, and the environment – all these factors cast, to varying degrees, a shadow upon the continued 'relevance' of labour history... (2010: 175).

In the Canadian context, Livingstone and Sawchuk (2004) affirm that academics depicting working class culture have done so in “splendid isolation from organized working-class practice” (47). They go on to explain how such depictions have “missed the creative agency and original features of the class culture, or at best conveyed them in disembodied and fragmented ways” (*Ibid*).

The result of these trends is a seeming inability on the part of post-materialist and post-modern scholarship to address the quotidian lives of those who must work for a living in the neo-liberal era. While trade unions (and the broader labour movement) have usually had good intentions regarding working people's lives, the bureaucratization of unions has not ameliorated the conditions of working people beyond codifying steady pay raises. In addition, the transition from a manufacturing economy to a service-based one has by no means signalled the end of dangerous, exploitative working conditions; indeed, the period following the economic stagnation of the 1960s and 1970s has been marked with increasing economic insecurity for many working families. Further, neither prolonged periods of economic growth nor stagnation have seen “the issue of worker control [raised] to the level of a mass demand among American workers” (Edwards, 1979: 153).

According to Shalla, labour in the neo-liberal era has a new vulnerability and the world of work has new complexities, which are under-researched (2007: 11). Indeed, the conditions of working people may even be a great deal worse after the economic collapse of the fall of 2008. My research explores how my participants make sense of the new, complex working conditions they face in a changing economy marked by crisis, increasing inequality, and global unrest. Given these circumstances, it is instructive to learn what employees see as the solution to their troubles, whether a traditional trade union, some other form of collective action, or faith in the government legislation to protect them from the worst excesses of managerial control.

## Methodological Considerations

### Looking for Labour in the New Economy

In-depth interviewing is the appropriate method to answer my research questions because it enables me to provide those managers who occupy the lower levels of the management structure the opportunity to narrate their own experiences and to discuss their lives in their own words. Indeed, it would be almost impossible to get the level of detail needed to understand their motivations, assumptions, and beliefs by conducting observations or distributing surveys.

Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) explain that semi-structured interviews use a guiding set of questions which allow comparison between participants while ensuring the participants have some leeway in the discussion (126). The higher the degree of standardization, of course, the easier comparison is between responses. Semi-structured interviewing is a way to balance standardization with spontaneous input from participants. When participants are encouraged to insert their own narrative into the conversation, responses that the interviewer could not have anticipated emerge, allowing for new perspectives and issues to be included in the research. The research can sometimes take unexpected detours, but generally is strengthened by this approach because it does not rely on the assumptions and suppositions of the researcher. Rather, the interview is a dialogue, a shared project of building knowledge, and a chance for the researcher to be redirected should her or his original assumptions prove to be misguided. Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leavy indicate that this approach can frequently yield rich and innovative results because “[i]nterviewees often have information or knowledge that may not have been thought of in advance by the researcher” (2006: 126). Interviewers who



encourage free input from their respondents are moving their research beyond the limitations of their own experience and opening it up to the unexpected. To conduct qualitative, semi-structured interviews is to consider the research participants as the experts of their own lives. The researcher is present to share in the process of producing knowledge and to work in tandem with the participant to construct meaning (*Ibid*: 128). This is why I refer to my interviewees as *participants* rather than respondents.

The researcher who uses semi-structured interviewing assumes that it is possible to construct the meaning of participants' experiences from their responses to interview questions. Qualitative research contains within it an assumption that individuals' knowledge of the social world can be communicated verbally with some degree of reliability (*Ibid*: 119). Rick Fantasia (1995) argues that to attempt to measure aspects of class consciousness (such as the ability to resist corporate ideology) through interviews is impossible because class consciousness does not exist apart from its being enacted by embodied individuals. Fantasia describes two studies which are illustrative of his theory. One, which appeared in *Labour/Le Travail* in 1994, conducted by T. Langford, measured class consciousness before and after a postal strike and found much more sympathy for collective action after the strike, but which was "sustained by only a minority of workers once the collective action had subsided" (*Ibid*: 272). Another is Marx's own survey project which Fantasia argues was not intended to measure class consciousness as much as "a way to inspire class action" (*Ibid*: 273). According to Fantasia, Marx maintained that the working class could not be considered a unified group in opposition to capital where there was no evidence of conscious activities against capital. In other words, class consciousness could not be measured as an attitude but could only be considered to exist

where it was in evidence as a conscious social and political movement. Fantasia (1995) suggests that, in conducting survey research and interviews to measure class consciousness, mainstream sociology has “tended to abstract ideational and attitudinal responses from the realm of lived, practical experience” (274).<sup>1</sup>

I have considerable respect for Fantasia’s perspective. In particular, I agree that interviews have a tendency to individualize what is necessarily a collective phenomenon. Recognizing these limitations, however, need not force us to abandon interviewing as a tool for examining class awareness. I contend that interviewing can still be a valid way to explore class consciousness because preceding any kind of collective action (the type of which Fantasia argues constitutes the only evidence of class consciousness) must come some realization of the *need* for collective action – in other words, some ideation of exploitation, unfair working conditions, and so on. These are the ideas that qualitative interviews can unearth. If, as researchers, we sense that there is little impetus for collective action among our sample, we may wish to conduct interviews to understand why. Similarly, if workers appear to align themselves with upper management and absorb the ideology of upper management, interviews can help us to understand why, in workers’ own words.

Aspects of class consciousness cannot be understood apart from their historical context. Borrowing from Marshall (1983), Fantasia argues that survey research is inappropriate for this kind of study because “attitudes and ideation are artificially decontextualized because they are abstracted from the class practices and social relations

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<sup>1</sup> I will briefly note here that Erik Olin Wright considers this definition of class struggle too narrow. He labels such definitions as “objectives definitions” and argues that they “have the danger of reducing class struggles to the relatively rare historical instances in which highly class conscious actors engage in struggle” (1985: 33). For his own purposes, Wright prefers to consider anything as class struggle that is undertaken by people of a class against those of another class (*Ibid*).

that give them meaning” (1995: 271). I argue that combining workers’ own analysis with an understanding of certain historical developments is a powerful way of examining this phenomenon. Qualitative interviewing need not provide a decontextualized analysis of class consciousness. When workers’ responses are situated within their historical context and understood as properly social responses, we can reach an understanding not only of *what* workers are doing but *why*. My research is informed by consideration of aspects of the unique historical context in which the call centre from which I drew my research participants is situated, such as: the sale of the company to a multi-national corporation, the historical deindustrialization of the geographic area, the economic crisis of 2008, and, more broadly, the decline of the labour movement. Not all of these aspects emerged as significant for my research participants, however.

Therefore, the purpose of my research is not to measure “class consciousness” but I borrow from the concept of class consciousness certain guiding principles that inform my line of questioning. That is, my theoretically interesting questions are informed by the concept of class consciousness and, more specifically, four particular aspects of it: an ideological divide between workers and upper management, pressure to conform to management ideology which flows downward from management to worker, attribution of problems at work to structural conditions, and a willingness to view collective action as both desirable and viable. My assumption is that there is an ideological divide between upper management and workers. My research examines the degree to which lower level managers align themselves ideologically with upper management rather than on-phone staff. Given their objective position within the labour force, lower level managers may have particular insights into these specific aspects of class consciousness.

Vallas (1987a, 1987b) uses survey research to understand how class consciousness among white collar workers differs from that found among blue collar workers. His method is to critically examine how specific objective factors of the labour process impact worker attitudes he classifies as being more or less “class conscious.” He finds that “increases in managerial control actually seem to reduce the proportion of workers who identify with the working class” (1987b: 534). He defines class consciousness with some precision and operationalizes the term according to a standardized set of attitudes which he can then measure. If we agree with Fantasia (1995) that class consciousness exists only at the moment of class action, Vallas can never find “class conscious” office workers.<sup>2</sup> But what he does accomplish is to delve into which objective conditions are more likely to give rise to attitudes among white collar workers in favour of collective action. This outcome is important enough to eliminate any thought of abandoning it, despite the fact that Vallas may not find evidence of class conscious workers as Fantasia (and perhaps Marx himself) would define them. Presumably, a tendency to view collective action as viable and desirable must precede the kinds of class consciousness about which Fantasia writes.

Specifically relevant to my research, Vallas (1987a) finds that managerial treatment of workers is one of the best predictors of attitudes favouring collective action. Further, he concludes that “workers’ conceptions of dignity, fair treatment, and other normative constructs very likely provide yardsticks that are critical in workers’ evaluation of managerial behaviour.... The strength of this perspective lies in its emphasis upon matters that too often go neglected: the normative expectations workers bring with them into the workplace” (*Ibid*: 253). If Vallas is correct that workers construct standards

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<sup>2</sup> See also footnote 1 in this chapter.

of fair treatment against which they measure managerial behaviour, then a healthy labour movement that provides them with a vociferous discourse of workers' rights becomes all the more critical.

I have borrowed somewhat from Vallas's method and used some attitudinal indicators commonly associated with class consciousness to examine whether (and in what ways) call centre workers are able to resist corporate ideology. The questions I asked my respondents were designed to "get at" some commonly accepted indicators of class consciousness: what are the avenues for suggesting change if you are ever experiencing a problem at work? Can you tell me about a time when you experienced friction with your supervisor at work? In your experience what are the advantages of being promoted? Is it hard to maintain relationships with people you knew on the phones before you were promoted? On the whole, would the company be improved or not if employees had more control over their jobs?

The first two of these questions encourage participants to think about the quality of their job – whether or not they find the work fulfilling and the social atmosphere of the workplace comfortable. My assumption is that workers who articulate a critique of what is likely to be an unsupportive and competitive work environment may be considered to be more in favour of collective action. Importantly, the semi-structured nature of my interviews encourages participants to expand on the objective conditions of the workplace and to include their own analysis of the causes and results of these conditions. As I describe in Chapter Four, it was common for participants to report negative job experiences, but include an analysis of these experiences that depict them as inevitable, unimportant, or even necessary to the functioning of the organization. The nexus of a

negative assessment of the work conditions without an accompanying assessment of class exploitation perhaps represents an example of an individual who would be less in favour of collective action.

The second set of questions asks participants to think about their role as middle managers in the organization and their subsequent relationship to those workers who remain on the phones, whom they may be directly or indirectly responsible for supervising. In my analysis, I consider participants who characterize on-phone staff negatively to identify themselves with upper management and to exhibit low levels of class solidarity, an important aspect of class consciousness.

Similarly, the final question is intended to elicit participants' thoughts about the value of upper management. Customarily, workers who consider themselves capable of making their own decisions, thereby rendering an extensive management structure unnecessary, would be considered to be in favour of collective action. Interestingly, although I intended for participants to refer to themselves when answering the question, many of them took the opportunity to cast doubt on the ability of on-phone staff to "get along" without management. Therefore, after six interviews I began adding the question, "Would you like to have more control over your work?" to contrast their vision of their own ability to be autonomous with that of on-phone staff.

The goal of my research is not to measure class consciousness. Rather, I combine analyses of participant responses with an understanding of the historical context to understand its impact on workers' framing of the issues they face at work.

I am aware of the difficulty of "getting at" worker attitudes towards class exploitation. Indeed, given the paucity of class analysis in popular culture I expected that

my interview would require participants to think about their working life in ways they never had before. Further, it is impossible to take a sampling of a person's responses to specific questions and use it to draw definitive conclusions. As Fantasia (1995) contends, "the intersubjective nature of meaning-construction in a class (or indeed any group) consciousness cannot easily be apprehended" (271). Rather than implementing a formal model for measuring class consciousness, I am interested in understanding how employees balance and negotiate conflicting discourses and interpretations and to what they attribute their negative job experiences if not to class exploitation.

Marxist researchers maintain that it is not people's individual failings that are the cause of the problems they face on the job; rather, conflict in the workplace is caused by the constraints and exploitation workers experience at the hands of the owners of the means of production. It is the researcher's job to "[unmask] the unjust conditions in the world, thus allowing the downtrodden to see the sources of their ills" (Bryman and Teevan, 2005:10). Marxist research should "empower the weak" by "smashing myths and uncovering contradictions" (*Ibid*). This is indeed a tall order, as research participants can (understandably) be resistant to the process, given that it often requires thinking about the world in unfamiliar ways. I relied on respectful and cautious follow-up questions to explore the seeming contradictions which were sometimes unearthed by participant responses and, in general, my participants were willing to explore alternative perspectives in the course of the interview.<sup>3</sup>

While I admit the difficulties inherent in conducting interviews to "get at" people's attitudes or opinions, I aver that this method is appropriate for what I want to

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<sup>3</sup> It is unfortunate that the timeline for this particular research did not lend itself to longitudinal interviewing, which would, I believe, have yielded significant results.

accomplish because, in however limited a way, workers' responses to questions about the quality of their jobs, the meaning of these jobs for their lives, and their perception of the value of collective action, may capture a rich understanding of how workers negotiate the occasionally volatile social atmosphere at work and what they perceive to be the most effective solution to their problems.

Even though I knew I would probably end up asking participants to think about their working life in unfamiliar ways, I avoided choosing participants who might be more likely to provide a class analysis (purposive sampling). I wanted a sample reflective of the general make-up of the Canadian workforce – a variety of political affiliations, ethnic backgrounds, education and employment experience, and respondents of both genders. The sensitive nature of my line of questioning provided me with a few challenges in accessing my research participants, not the least of which was that the Brock University Research Ethics Board considered it unsuitable for me to directly recruit respondents myself. Concerns that participating in research on unionism in call centres would put my participants at risk meant that I had to rely on a contact within the organization to help me recruit participants, thereby protecting respondents' privacy. I specified to my contact that all employees who were or had been lower level managers at this call centre were welcome to participate. I tried to maintain equal numbers of male and female participants and in the end I interviewed three men and five women. Four of the participants have since left the company, two had been moved back on to the phones prior to the interview, and one had never actually worked on the phones. Her case provides an interesting point of comparison. This particular woman has a higher degree of formal education, she was hired directly as a low level manager (as opposed to my other participants, who were



promoted from on-phone positions), and because she transferred from a branch in another country, where call centre work is more often viewed as a “good” job, making her experiences markedly different than my other participants.

Relying on a contact within the organization was time-consuming. I could not myself take the initiative to invite participants and had to wait on the willingness and ability of my contact to do so. Prospective participants were often slow to contact me, juggling, as many of them are, busy work lives and family responsibilities. I had to review the ethical considerations of my research and the protocol for recruiting employees several times with my contact to ensure that my research met with the requirements of the Brock University Social Science Research Ethics Board (SREB). In particular, participating in an interview in which practices of supervisors and executives might be discussed was considered by the SREB to be risky for the workers at this call centre (see Appendix D).

### ***Profile of the Research Participants***

To complete my research, I conducted eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews with employees of one call centre in the Niagara Region. While call centres have been widely researched since their proliferation in the late 1990s, a great deal of this research is quantitative or focuses only on ameliorating working conditions, rather than providing a radical critique. My research contributes rich descriptions of call centre work from those people who actually perform the work. Kirby and McKenna (2004) state that “[i]t has been our experience that people on the margins often know something is wrong, but their concerns are interpreted as a personal problem or failing rather than as a public

issue” (73). Critical research assumes that the researched possess valid knowledge about their own lives and should participate as equal partners in the research process.

All research participants had been employed at the call centre for at least six months and had occupied a variety of positions within the organization. All but one of my research participants has worked on the phones at one time and been promoted to an off-phone position (although, two of those seven have since been moved back to the phones). Four of my research participants – all females – have since left the company. The call centre has been in operation for approximately 12 years, and in 2007, during my time in the field, it was sold to a multi-national corporation based in Spain which changed the structure and work processes of the office I researched. Since my research spanned the economic crisis of the fall of 2008, I took the opportunity to ask some of my participants about the impact they thought the recession was having on their jobs and the company as a whole.

All of my participants were in their 30s and 40s – no participant was as old as 50. All except one were born in Canada. My contact did not ask anyone at the call centre to participate who did not eventually agree to do so, making the refusal rate zero. In fact, only one man was at all hesitant to participate, but when he was assured that his responses would remain confidential, he spoke to me quite willingly. Interviews ranged in length from one hour to just over two hours and were all conducted in person (not over the phone or by e-mail). As laid out in my Ethics Proposal (see appendix A), each participant and I worked out a mutually convenient time and location for the interview. Sometimes this was in my home or university office; sometimes it was in a public place such as a local coffee shop or public library.

The research took place in a previously industrial community with a comparatively large pool of labour. This is by no means accidental as call centres have been known to choose their location based on the availability of labour and a local government keen to attract businesses to the area (McFarland, 2002). Exacerbating the economic setbacks in southern Ontario is the lack of public sector work for people to rely on as a companion to, or replacement for, jobs in industry or manufacturing. Throughout the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, industrial communities have been particularly vulnerable to economic instability and mass lay-offs. Corporations' overinvestment in technology and dedication to the rationalization of the labour process have resulted in a consistent "slimming down" of employment numbers as, over time, fewer and fewer people are required to sustain output levels. As C. Wright Mills tells us, "[t]his industrial revolution seems to be permanent, seems to go on through war and boom and slump; thus 'a decline in production results in a more than proportional decline in employment; and an increase in production results in a less than proportional increase in employment'" (1966: 95).

My participants reflect the diversity among white collar workers in Canada. They come from a variety of ethnic and class backgrounds and domestic circumstances. Some have no post-secondary education, others hold bachelor's degrees. Most are raising children with a partner and talked about the challenges of balancing work and family life. One woman explained to me the particular challenges she faces as a single mother and the minimal help she expects from her new partner. They are, like many Canadians, painfully aware of the lack of prestige associated with the work they do and spoke of the search for meaning in their lives when they cannot find it in their jobs. For this reason,

their stories will be compelling for working Canadians and for sociologists interested in understanding the experiences of working class people in white-collar jobs. Due to my small, non-representative sample size, however, my findings cannot be generalized.

Qualitative interviews yield two kinds of data: direct knowledge of respondents' lived experience but also "more generally their perceptions about their broader social world" (Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006: 123). My research relies on participants' accounts of their work experiences. Such research can only proceed on the assumption that what respondents perceive about their social world, rightly or wrongly, is important for us to discover. Interviews are a way for us to access knowledge that is different from accepted, canonical knowledge – it is the hidden knowledge of the quotidian world, of subjugated peoples, of controversial ideas rather than the accepted ideology (*Ibid*). As Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leavy contend, "[t]hose who have been marginalized in a society...may have hidden experiences and knowledge that have been excluded from our understanding of social reality" (2006: 123). Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to access that hidden world because they allow the participants to shape the interview according to their own knowledge, as the experts of their own lives.

Additionally, however, what my respondents do not see (the relevance of unions for office workers, the ability of workers to manage themselves, and so on) can speak volumes about the success of the labour movement in a changing economy. Hence, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews for their ability to reveal knowledge even as it is being created through the conversing of the interviewer and the participant. Despite the difficulties I knew I would face in asking participants to speak on subjects they may have previously thought little about, it seemed that this was the method most likely to

yield the stories of people who are often silenced, including those aspects of the story previously invisible even to them.

Ultimately, participants seemed keen to share their experiences with me, and the interviews yielded fruitful discussions about the nature of work in the call centre, about low level managers' relationships to on-phone staff, and about participants' hopes for the future. The interviews revealed that my participants are capable of articulating complete and critical analyses of their work lives; their insights were deep, rich, and reflective (in most cases) of their longevity in the call centre. In the subsequent chapter, I examine their responses to my semi-structured interview guide in terms of understanding the degree to which low level managers align themselves with executives, understanding the specific and unique working conditions of low level managers, and discovering how low level managers in the call centre make sense of the problems they face in the workplace.

## Management Material

### Situating Lower Level Managers in the Call Centre and the Labour Movement

My research is informed by Marx's theory that the increasing division of labour accompanying capital's advancement would produce "... 'a special kind of wage labourer' whose exclusive function was the supervision of other workers" (Livingstone and Mangan, 1996: 20). Using Marx's original construction of the class structure in capitalism, lower level managers do not own the means of production, but their role in the organization is frequently to be the purveyors of the ideology of the capitalist class. Their position as supervisors of other workers means that their daily tasks often require them to be enforcers of this ideology. They maintain the policies that legitimise and entrench management power.

My research suggests that lower level managers' objective position within the organization, part-way between workers and owners, is highly constraining. There is little room for them to use their own judgment and even less room for them to make improvements to phone agents' working lives if they chose to do so. In short, where they may have taken an anti-management stance as phone agents, once promoted this is difficult to implement, even in situations where they feel they are on the receiving end of some "bad" managing themselves. As managers, they primarily align themselves with capital, with the executive class, and are prone to identify interpersonal relationships as the source of their dissatisfaction at work, rather than the *structural conflict* inherent in the capitalist workplace. Those who have occupied a position in the lower levels of management the longest seem least likely to be in favour of unionizing privately-owned call centres. They construct unions as unnecessary for themselves (due to government

legislation enshrining the rights of workers) and undesirable for the phone agents (who are sometimes depicted as unwilling to work even without the protection of a union). However, when juxtaposed with stories of overwork, inadequate training, and flimsy promotional structures, the realities of life in the call centre emerge as problematic in a way that perhaps some form of collective action could address.

I have divided my analysis of the research data into three parts: 1) an analysis of call centre work in general and within this the specific working conditions of lower level managers in the call centre as described by lower level managers themselves, 2) an analysis of whether or not my research participants rely on a “workers’ rights” discourse when assessing their work life. To accomplish this, I examine my participants’ perception of the relevance of some form of collective action for their industry. And finally, 3) I illustrate the ways in which my research participants are inclined to identify interpersonal problems as the source of the problems they face at work, rather than the very real structural conflicts they face.

### ***Labour Process and Policy in the Call Centre***

Work in the call centre is highly bureaucratic and stratified and the on-phone work is also highly automated and scripted. On-phone employees are provided scripts to enable them to control and standardize their interactions with those on the other end of the phone – either people who have called in seeking information, wanting to buy a product or requesting a service, or people who have been called by the automated dialer (Pupo and Noack, 2010). In the latter case, the automated dialer selects a number to call from a list of previously inputted numbers, and then routes the call to an available agent (Pandy and Rogerson, 2012). The scripts given to on-phone employees may leave some

room for adaptation to better suit the employee's personality or preferences but in some cases, workers are required to completely adhere to the script, and calls are monitored to ensure this practice (Pupo and Noack, 2010).

Phone agents are typically divided into two work groups: those that take incoming calls, and those that make outgoing calls (although the term "make the calls" is misleading here, since employees have no choice over who to call, when, or for what purpose) (Pandy and Rogerson, 2012). In both cases, employees log on to their computer, which tracks the time they log in and out (including time spent on breaks) and the time they spend on each call and in between calls doing follow-up work. They don a headset, dial in to a "queue" and the computer (on the command of one type of low level manager) routes calls to the worker's headset. In many cases workers on "incoming" queues have access to a caller's account, enabling them to answer the caller's question, remotely fix the caller's cellphone or computer, order a product, make changes to the caller's billing information, and so on. After the call is completed, the employee has a few minutes to complete any necessary work (such as updating records) before having to "jump back into the queue" and become available for more calls. Workers on a busy queue may spend all day taking back-to-back calls. The fast pace of the work is frequently combined with a great deal of emotional labour, and it is therefore perhaps not surprising that more women than men tend to be employed in these jobs, as they are often viewed as being skilled in this form of labour (Pupo and Noack, 2010).

In the call centre from which I drew my research participants, the physical environment reflects the symbolic division of labour between on-phone (or "production") work and management or back-office type work. The production floor, as it is called, is



where on-phone employees sit in pods arranged in groups of about five. Each pod has a desk with a computer terminal, a phone, and a headset. There may be a supervisors' desk and supervisors may walk the floor answering questions and monitoring behaviour, but supervisors can also contact employees through e-mail. On the other side of the building is the lunchroom, training rooms, rooms that house equipment for monitoring phone calls, and management pods and offices.

Managers at the lower end of the spectrum can be engaged in training on-phone workers, training other managers, human resources, and attracting new clients to the call centre. Most call centres are not "in-house," although some businesses are big enough to have their own call centre. Usually, call centre work is outsourced, meaning that companies will hire a call centre to run a particular queue, whether it is tele-sales, providing travel information and selling travel insurance, technical support, collections work, or any number of other services (Pandy and Rogerson, 2012; Huws, 2009). In Canada and England, where there has been expansive restructuring of public services to make them more accessible to people in the "information age," the government uses call centres to help with election campaigns, to provide services for student loan borrowers, to assist people applying for citizenship, and a whole host of other services once accessed by going to an office building and speaking one-on-one to a clerical person (Pupo and Noack, 2010; Huws, 2009). Some low level managers within the call centre may be responsible for acquiring these contracts, and also for maintaining them, ensuring that the clients' needs are being met by the on-phone staff.

Training of on-phone employees is done primarily at the time of hiring, but often continues throughout their tenure with the call centre. Employees who have "bad calls"

(whether this means they failed to make a sale, could not make a customer happy, or repeatedly veered away from the script) will frequently be “coached” by their supervisors on better call practices until they show signs of improvement. This usually means that a supervisor will take an agent aside and review some of the requirements for customer interactions. The agent will customarily sign a document indicating that they have been “coached” to improve their performance. Some lower level managers may have the power to recommend that a particular agent be fired based on information from these coaching sessions and an agent’s performance record.

In some cases, even lower level managers might have to travel all over the world to complete their tasks (Pandy and Rogerson, 2012). Clients may have their home base in the United States or Europe, new call centres might open, requiring special teams of managers to supervise “setting up shop” until local employees are capable of operating on their own. Human Resources managers might have to meet with local HR teams as far away as Asia to ensure procedures are being followed correctly. As Taylor and Bain (2008) argue, there are myriad factors taken into account when locations are chosen as sites for new call centres and access to cheap labour is but one of these considerations (139). The existence of sufficient infrastructure, local incentives in the form of tax breaks, and “English language facility” are all taken into account in choosing the new location. At all times there is interplay between the locally situated centre, and its global reach. Those who take the calls often know where their customers are located, but customers may not realize they are reaching a different country, or continent, entirely.

## *The Experience of Managing Others*

The objective position of lower level managers is an inherently conflicted one. This is especially true for those who have been promoted through the ranks. Their position as a supervisor or manager of on-phone agents may require them to monitor, penalize, and pressure those workers with whom they may have had close contact when on the phones – people that they once identified as their equals in the workplace and with whom they may have socialized outside of work. In short, they may be required to treat on-phone agents in exactly the ways they complain of being treated by their superiors. As they are exploited, so they in turn must exploit on-phone agents, or risk being fired. One woman admitted,

Yeah, I felt pressured to push them [phone agents] harder, to get more volume, to throw more calls at them...It was a lot because we were constantly trying to get more volume, get more volume...and then, you know, they'd burn out and they'd get upset. So if we didn't have enough calls the directors were pissed and...if we had too many the agents were pissed. So you couldn't really find a happy medium.  
[Jane]<sup>1</sup>

This woman's job requires that she act counter to what she may otherwise have done and her unease is clearly evident. Caught between the demands of her superiors (the directors) and the phone agents, she is forced to engage in behaviour with which she is uncomfortable. Being unable to resist the demands of her superiors, she continues to route the heavy call volume to the agents' headsets, despite knowing that "[i]t's really stressful for them...It's too much for them" (Jane).

This conflict was central to almost all of my research participants' work lives, and resulted in inconsistent and contradictory positions regarding phone agents. All of my participants sympathised with the phone agents on the basis of their heavy workload and

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<sup>1</sup> Names and some biographical details have been changed.

yet, at the same time, could also claim that agents were in this unenviable position because of their lack of work ethic, formal education, or some other personal condition that rendered them unfit for other work. One man described his role in the company by saying, "I provide a shoulder for [phone agents] to cry on" and claimed that agents "don't give themselves the respect that they deserve for the performance that they do" but then complained of having to deal with agents' "negativity" and "entitlement issues" and argued that being on the phones is "not a hard job" (Mike). These rapidly shifting, contradictory, attitudes are suggestive of the conflicting demands placed on middle managers, and their uneasiness about supervising phone agents. While they might feel sympathetically towards the phone agents, the demands of their job frequently do not allow them to act in a sympathetic manner.

At least one of Mike's colleagues would seem to disagree with him on this last point. When asked which group of workers was most likely to get the blame if something goes wrong in the workplace, Sally immediately stated, "[i]n the end, the agents on the floor. I think regardless of what the situation is it somehow gets pushed back to them." This woman even indicated that some managers may intentionally blame agents for problems in order to save their own jobs, saying, "...nobody wants to take responsibility because then it's their job on the line, right? And...I think that happens a lot!" Importantly, however, this woman had recently moved back onto the phones from a middle manager position, potentially allowing her to feel freer in her critique of management.

Another man in a similar situation, having been switched back to the phones as a result of his lower level management position being phased out, maintained that one's

perception of the company changes “completely” depending on whether you are on the phones or not (Rob). He also indicated that once a person is promoted to a management position, she or he is less likely to carry on friendships with on-phone staff. He explained, “...you’re gonna start gravitating slowly towards the off-phone staff. Soon’s you do that then you’re kinda isolated further and further from the [phone agents]” (Rob).

Significantly, of all of my research participants, these two who had recently moved back onto the phone had the most positive assessment of phone agents and were the most supportive of them. This suggests that the *objective position* of middle managers in a call centre makes it difficult for them to identify with on-phone staff. In fact, their job requires them to actively coerce and constrain them. But for those lower level managers who have been promoted through the ranks, their newly antagonistic position towards phone staff is an uncomfortable one, as evidenced by the guilt and unease that they expressed and their rapidly shifting attitudes toward agents. As Mills (1966) tells us, upper management expects that managers who occupy the lower echelons will act in accordance with the interests of the organization, even if this means supporting unpopular policies. Upper management actively solicits the loyalty of lower level managers by suggesting that there should be no divide between management ranks – that is, by eliciting allegiance to the management group itself (1966: 121).

If being promoted to management level contributes to call centre workers being less supportive of on-phone staff, it seems reasonable to expect that the longer workers remain at the management level, the harder they find it to identify with on-phone staff. Indeed, of all of my research participants, the woman who had worked in the call centre the longest had the most consistently negative evaluation of on-phone staff. At the time

of the interview, Julie had worked at the call centre for more than ten years, and was promoted to a management position very early on. Julie explained that after several years spent training phone agents, she was ready to move to another department within the call centre because training had become “like babysitting.” She suggested that over the years “the quality of the agents” had deteriorated and that in the past “people had more work ethics [sic] and were more willing to do the work.” In particular, Julie complained about phone agents who missed days of training, despite admitting, “I miss days because my kids are sick and because I get sick.” In the absence of concrete evidence that on-phone staff have become less capable or skilled (none of my other research participants suggested this), it would seem that, instead, Julie’s assessment of them has harshened over the years, perhaps reflecting her perception that aligning herself with capital is necessary for retaining her job and earning further promotion.

My conclusion that lower level managers are inclined to align themselves with capital is evidenced, in part, by Julie’s willingness to attribute negative motives more often to phone agents than to managers. For example, when discussing the phenomenon of workers moving between call centres to find employment, I suggested that both managers *and* phone agents engage in this behaviour. She replied, “[i]t does happen on the management level as well but I find that...for a lot of the agents...it’s really when you’re close to being terminated or if you’re just not really dedicated anymore you may go to another one...While, a lot of the managers I know who *have* gone to other call centres [it] was for...better opportunities” (Julie). While, in fact, the managers and the phone agents are outwardly engaging in the same behaviour (looking for better work), my

research participant associates the behaviour with disloyalty on the part of the phone agents only.

Julie was also among those most vocal about the exploitation of lower level managers in the call centre and noted several times that managers are sometimes expected to put in extra hours without receiving additional pay and even went so far as to say that unpaid overtime is “the basic expectation.” Julie explained that the call centre can count on managers to work extra hours because “there are people that are willing to jump at the opportunities, so...you won’t do it then someone else will. Nobody’s irreplaceable...often not a lot of value’s put on the individual.”

These comments resonate with Robin Leidner’s work, which highlights workers’ abilities to understand the shifting realities of work in the new economy (2006). One study that focused on workplaces that have implemented what we might call worker flexibility policies, “reveal[s] a complex reality in which workers perceive opportunity as well as heightened risk. Their willingness to accept new demands on them at work and to commit to the kind of personal transformation they are told is necessary to succeed in the new economy varies but is generally high, sometimes reflecting desperation, sometimes reflecting manipulation by employers, but sometimes sustained by experiences of enhanced personal efficacy” (2006: 453).

However, Julie’s assessment of phone agents’ complaints is markedly different. She explained to me that she plays on a women’s baseball team with some women who are phone agents at various call centres and rather than viewing this as an opportunity for solidarity, she concludes instead that “[t]here’s already a divide” between her, as a manager, and them, as phone agents. She describes their conversations by saying,

...anytime they talk about work is complaining about it, you know, the customer's or this supervisor's a jerk and this one's alright but this other one is horrible and I'm always sitting back and thinking: I'm on the other side and it's interesting to hear both sides...There's already a divide between the two, so. I mean, people do talk to one another! But it's still the people in the back [this is a common phrase for managers, since most managers sit in separate section of the building]...nobody knows who they are. (Julie).

But the truly conflicted and ambiguous nature of the position in which she finds herself is only revealed later when I ask if her relative invisibility to the phone agents' makes them feel as though she has a lot of control and they have no control. She replied, "[o]h exactly! And in a lot of ways? That's true." This respondent is acutely aware of her position as someone who sits "in the back" of the call centre, where managers have their offices and stations, at a remove from the phone agents whose work actually generates revenue for the company. Her work shapes and informs how phone agents are treated at work, but she is a faceless member of the management team to them. She asserts that managers and agents "do talk to one another" but is also aware of how her promotion to the back office has changed how she reacts to phone agents, preventing her from fully supporting their complaints about their "horrible" managers.

On the other hand, lower level managers have plenty of reasons to complain about their treatment at the hands of their own supervisors, which might suggest that they have ample grounds for cooperation with phone agents. Several of them, including Julie, identified the long hours and inadequate pay as reasons for feeling stressed at work. One woman stated that during one particularly busy period she was "close" to looking for another job (Sarah). She explained, "I was like, it's time to get my resume out, dust it off, update it with all of my management experience that I have now and start puttin' my resume out." Here again, rather than identify with phone agents, who also frequently



report feeling overworked and stressed (see Holman, Chissick, and Totterdell, 2002; McFarland, 2002; and Mirchandani, 2004), managers frequently blame phone agents for the problems they face at work by suggesting that they have a poor work ethic. For example, when asked if the company would be improved if employees had more control over their jobs, Sarah stated, "I think if you gave the agents more control than they had they would take advantage of it." Similarly, Mike commented, "I think they would effectively manage themselves out of a job." Instead of searching for solidarity with phone agents, they focus their efforts on getting further promotions to someday be in a position to have more control and, as Sarah stated, "be in the loop." Stanley Barrett, in his study of the attitudes of workers in rural Ontario in the 1990s, describes finding similarly conservative tendencies, saying, "[t]heir dream was not to abolish the elite, it was to push aside existing members and occupy it themselves..." (cited in Winson, 1997: 446). In other words, workers do not always react to inequality by calling for it to be abolished, but with a desire to join those who are privileged by inequality.

Significantly, lower level managers frequently do not come from privileged backgrounds and many do not have a great deal of formal education. They may have limited employment opportunities beyond the call centre. In these respects, they *resemble* phone agents but their objective position within the call centre encourages them to look down on phone agents and try to align themselves with executives, who are much more highly paid and furnished with business or graduate degrees. As Julie agreed, middle managers probably wield more power within the organization and could use it to help phone agents, but their ideological alignment with executives too often leads them to criticize and look down on phone staff instead. In part, Edwards has predicted this when

he writes: “[t]he rise of the large administrative staff, with its middle position between employers and manual workers, has further fractured the common class basis” (163).

Lower level managers are not unconscious of their position in the company as relatively low-paid managers with relatively little clout. One woman described feeling disappointed when she realized her promotion to manager did not give her as much influence and authority as she expected. She explained her realization that she had not yet made it into “the club” by saying,

I wanna say there’s, like, an invisible line when it comes to directors to managers. I think the directors know a whole lot about what’s going on about new businesses coming in and they’re not sharing...I think that if I were to change anything about the style or the structure is to open the communication so the people who are running your businesses know what the direction is...And I don’t know if it’s that they’re too busy, they can’t? Or they’ve been told not to. I don’t know what it is but it’s definitely – I thought that when I went from coordinator to manager I’d, y’know, be in the in...[but I’m] still on the outside lookin’ in. (Sarah)

Sarah also believed that the phone agents must feel similarly disconnected from the goals and processes of the call centre, noting, “agents don’t go talk to the directors.”

One man, who has worked at this particular call centre almost from its inception in the mid-90s, proudly distinguished himself from “business-school”-type executives, suggesting that working his way up through the ranks gave him a unique advantage in the organization. He explained this by saying,

...starting off where I did and getting to where I am now I’ve met a lot of people, you know? Thousands and thousands of people have come through our doors. And starting from their level and working my way through, you know, they seem to have different respect for you than...someone who gets hired as a manager and they’ve never seen before because, you know, they don’t know you. (Bill)

However, several of my research participants provided context for this comment by explaining the wage differential between those who are promoted through the ranks and those who are hired externally. One woman told me that she felt it was easier to be an

external hire “only because if they’re hiring outside the company they want you to come in and they’re willing to pay the money to bring you in. Whereas if you’re coming from production [on-phone position] up: well, we’ll give you your current wage” (Sally).

Another woman corroborated this pattern, saying external hires might receive “a higher salary up front” (Julie). This woman further explained to me that phone agents who are promoted through the ranks could be exploited precisely because they have fewer formal qualifications. She indicated that there is an informal policy to “groom them and...because [the company is] bringing them up from the agent level or the supervisor level, they’ll be thankful that we’re advancing their career, therefore be willing to accept less [compensation]” (Julie). She suggested that the reason fewer agents were being promoted now was that “[t]hey can afford to seek people who have exactly the qualifications that they’re looking for” (Julie).<sup>2</sup> When we contrast this description of being promoted through the ranks with Bill’s account, we get a radically different view of the lower echelons of the management structure. What is salient, however, is that lower level managers, whether proud of their position or resentful of treatment they perceive to be unfair, are all too conscious of their distinct position in the call centre vis-à-vis the executive class.

Lower level managers have varying degrees of sympathy towards phone agents, but even those managers who are very sympathetic to the stresses and demands of being on the phone are prevented from seeking solidarity with them because of their designated position within the organizational hierarchy. Many times, lower level managers’ job

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<sup>2</sup> Winson and Leach (2002) find that laid-off workers in rural Ontario believed that corporations began to favour non-local people for management positions to facilitate the laying-off process (152). One man in particular indicated that management felt it would be easier for non-local managers to do the laying-off because of the lack of personal relationships with the employees.

descriptions require them to further intensify the labour of phone agents. Rather than encouraging them to align themselves with phone agents, this situation more often impels them to align themselves with executives. One woman, who applied for work as a phone agent when she was unable to pay her student loans, explained that rather than seeking solidarity with phone agents and dismantling the executive class, lower level managers were more likely to try to become executives themselves. In other words, it made more sense for her and her colleagues to try to advance themselves in their careers than to support collective action. Rather than complain about the cost of having many executive positions in the organization, their attitude was

just...go in, do your job and get promoted up into those positions. Being in a union doesn't help you get to be CEO of a company. I mean, to get into those positions you kinda have to be outside of the union. I think the union only protects to a certain level. And...I mean, whoever owns the company can make whatever decision they want. (Sarah)

This response might be viewed as exemplifying someone with a working class background who got her start working on the phones, who considers it more advantageous to identify with capital than her former peers. Rather than painting a picture of cooperation and mutuality in the workplace, middle managers who adopt the corporate work ethic are more likely to rely on a neo-liberal discourse of individuality and personal achievement.

### ***Perceived Relevance of Collective Action for the Call Centre Industry***

Having examined the unique position of low level managers in the call centre, I now consider their perception of the labour movement, and specifically, the perceived relevance of unions for the call centre industry. I did not ask my research participants about the benefits of unions for on-phone and off-phone staff separately. Rather, I asked

them to reflect on the benefits of unions more broadly. At no time did any of my respondents indicate that they wanted their own jobs to be unionized while on-phone staff should remain ununionized. Rather, those in favour of unions (two) were in favour of them for both themselves and for phone agents. Those less in favour of unions did not make a distinction between their relevance for phone agents or low level managers either.

The issue of unionism is, in fact, used in my research as a conceptual handle to begin a discussion about the value of collective action and workers' rights. I did not expect most of my research participants to immediately articulate a "worker rights" discourse and therefore, I felt it would be helpful to use a familiar concept – trade unions – to enable us to begin talking about the realm of work in what has perhaps become an unfamiliar way to most Canadian workers. By beginning with the familiar issue of unions, I constructed a frame around the issue of worker rights versus management prerogative, which opened up the discussion to broader issues around workers' rights. I used trade unionism as a conceptual handle to introduce the topic of workers' rights and my research participants had a variety of opinions on the relevance of unions (and, by extension, the labour movement) to their lives.

Roughly half of my research participants come from households where a parent or sibling have membership in a trade union. This did not predict support for unionism, however. Ultimately, I found that there is a great deal of misinformation and misunderstanding circulating about the role of unions. Further, the majority of my research participants do not see the benefit to working people of union membership. Certainly, the retrenchment of the labour movement might make workers less likely to adopt a worker rights discourse and less likely to demand that work conform to

democratic ideals. They are unlikely to articulate such demands when there is currently so little public support for them.

Where it existed, support for unionism typically took the form of a generalized feeling that a union would improve morale, the work environment, and so on. Disapproval of unionism came mainly from a perception that unions are no longer necessary and a perception that unions are not right for the call centre industry. Virtually every research participant who expressed disapproval of a union coming into the call centre was concerned about "union dues" and articulated some doubt that there would be a benefit to having a union equal to the drawback of paying dues, which is perhaps unsurprising given their economic position. One woman who might be considered "pro-union" expressed her exasperation with this attitude, which she considers widespread, saying,

I don't know why they're not unionized yet. I know it's happened a few times where we've had unionized representatives come talk to people but then you get...the company-wide e-mail about how you don't want to work in a union...And I think the vast majority of the company would much rather be unionized than not...if they understood, you know, what a union actually does for people versus, "oh well, I gotta pay union dues?" You know, so that's just another chunk of something coming off my paycheque? (Sally)

According to this woman, who has since left the company, non-supporters of a union do not see the benefits of unionism like job security and better pay, which are currently left to the goodwill of individual supervisors.

Another woman who had been promoted to a middle management position early in her career, corroborated this account of the company's efforts to prevent a union organizing its employees. She told me that "a few times a lot of the call centres threaten 'union' and then you'd have...[the CEO] go down and sweet talk 'em, buy 'em a box of

pizza, a cart full of ice cream and – oh, [there is] no union!...And it was...no one even spoke the word union. They were afraid to get fired” (Jane). The kinds of union-busting tactics employed in the call centre may have contributed to the anti-union opinions of some of my research participants, although anti-union sentiment goes hand in hand with the discrediting of the labour movement in general.<sup>3</sup>

One woman who expressed concern about the welfare of phone agents but strong disapproval of bringing in a union stated flatly, “if there was a union [brought into] the office I probably would not join because I know a part of my paycheque would go there” (Amy). One research participant who has worked at two call centres echoed this statement, saying, “[i]f [the company] turned union, I’m gone. I’m not giving any of my money to a union ‘cause they don’t do anything for me. Do they offer you job protection? No” (Mike). Just as Sally indicated, anti-union sentiment combines with misinformation about the benefits of unions, resulting in disapproval of the union being brought into the call centre.

Disapproval of unions may not always be associated with an anti-labour stance. A sound argument may be made against unions because they do not go far enough in supporting the working class (see Howard, 1985; Rinehart, 2001; and Cayo Sexton, 2003). In this case, however, my research participants expressed anti-union attitudes in association with an anti-labour stance. They associate unionism with protecting lazy workers, driving companies out of business, and quelling enterprising spirits. They repeatedly complained about the high wages of union workers, despite the fact that it is

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<sup>3</sup> These views are by no means restricted to service sector employees. When Winson (1997) asked workers who had been laid off after a plant closure about the role of the union in the layoff, he found that “[a]mong the majority of workers, attitudes towards their trade union and unions in general ranged from a grudging willingness to admit that they provided some advantages...to a position of outright hostility...” (448).

reasonable to assume that it is in their own best interests to support decent wages for working people.

For example, one woman whose brother – a miner - had been a member of a union described to me the situation at his workplace, saying the union has

...gone in and made it so the wage is so high...it hurts when you have to pay people an exorbitant amount of money to break rock and they're not really working that hard...if I chose just to come in and play on my computer all day...I'd get fired...it's harder to get rid of people in a union... (Sarah).

Rather than demand similar benefits of high wages and secure working conditions for themselves, non-unionized workers criticize their unionized peers, and construct them as “not really working that hard.” Instead of constructing working people as competent, deserving, and capable of self-governing, which would in turn reflect positively on herself, as a worker, Sarah tells me that if, in her company, the phone agents were given more control over their own jobs “...they would take advantage of it. And I think that's what's gone on with unions...so, no, I don't think giving them more control would be a good thing. I think it would kill our business. Which is why unions in my industry scares me. 'Cause if you start paying people more, well then our cost of doing business goes up.” My research participants did not argue that a union would not go far enough to protect their rights as workers. Instead they complained about what they perceive to be indulgent treatment of union workers *and* suggested that a union would be unable to benefit them. As one man, who suggested unions are only for the trades, or other types of “long-term employment”, stated: “I can't see...a union doing anything differently than my boss for me...[and my boss does it] without taking more off my pay to do it” (Bill).



Lower level managers who did not support the unionization of call centres frequently suggested that unions are no longer necessary because of improved working conditions.<sup>4</sup> Several of my research participants indicated that they thought unions had served their purpose when working conditions were unfair, dangerous, or exploitative – but that this is no longer the case. To do this, they actively construct current working conditions as acceptable. As one woman explained to me, she didn't feel the need for a union because "...I have a voice anyways" (Amy). Similarly, another woman told me "[w]hen you're treated fairly, I don't think there's benefits to having the union. And when I was on the phones and the first few years that I was training, I would say that, you know, we were treated fairly" (Julie). Lastly, Sarah reported,

I think we're in a society now that people work together for the better good of the people that work with them. It's not so much the people at the top get rich and they don't care what it is that you have to do to make them their money. I think there's a little bit more feeling in business than there used to be...and the government rules and regulations have come so far as well, to ensure the safety in the workplace, to ensure equality in the workplace and I think when you have a government that's completely stepped in and has legislated a lot of the stuff that the union was protecting people on? Negates the need for unions.

However, when asked if she found her workplace equitable, she told me that middle managers who are promoted up from the phones (like herself) get paid less than external hires "...just because that's just the way our business works. Which is a little unfair..."

Edwards (1979) confirms this, reporting that "[i]ncreasingly, the working class has turned away from unions and looked instead to government to regulate, protect, and provide....workers turn to the state to amend, shape, and dictate the rules of bureaucratic

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<sup>4</sup> It is instructive to note that this process goes both ways. Rinehart (2001) demonstrates this when he points out that "[c]ompanies have increased wages and fringe benefits, improved working conditions, and instituted quality of work life programs in an attempt to persuade employees that unions are unnecessary" (86).

control” (161). Rinehart (2001) argues that government regulation targeting the worst features of industrialization meant that work could be constructed as unproblematic given the new safety legislation (2). Therefore, if workers continued to chafe against the bonds of work it was because of their laziness and unwillingness to work (Ibid).

Importantly, it is not because the working conditions in the call centre are not problematic that lower level managers do not support the idea of a union. All of my research participants complained of stressful working conditions and unpaid overtime or described inequitable treatment that they have witnessed. Sarah vividly described a particularly stressful time when she was required to work many unpaid hours of overtime and the effect that this had on her. She said, “If you’d asked me a month ago, I would have told you I was lookin’ for a new job. Because things were just soooo...bad. It was like...everything was such a mess...I wasn’t getting a lot of support and I felt like I was ~~drowning~~.” Another woman echoed these words, saying that when her manager left the company “I had to do both my job and her job. And her job was 24 hours, so my work started to slip. And I felt like I couldn’t help the agents, it was...it was just drowning” (Jane). A third woman described her struggle to balance parenting with being “on call” in the evenings, saying it made her “tired” and that she felt stressed “because I mean I was handling [it] with two children. Drove me nuts” (Amy).

Others of my research participants describe the insecurity of call centre jobs and the ease with which anyone can be terminated. One woman told me that she knew of some “hard-working” lower level managers who had been terminated because “their personalities didn’t mesh well with executives” (Sally). One man, whose job required him to work closely with phone agents, explained that they are the most vulnerable in the

call centre. According to him, the predominant attitude towards phone agents is "...if you're not performing then we're just gonna let you go, replace you with someone who can. 'Cause ultimately the managers want to look good... That's why call centres are also really high turnover" (Mike).

Livingstone and Sawchuk (2004) note that corporations make good use of the implicit threat of layoff where insubordinate or outspoken employees are concerned. In their study of the General Motors plant in Pickering, ON, one man stated that employees who complained about conditions were told they could leave because there were "30,000 people" outside wanting to get in (79-80). This tactic, argue Livingstone and Sawchuk, heightened workers' sense of job insecurity.

Sometimes, during lean times, call centres will move managers who used to hold on-phone positions back onto the phones rather than lay them off altogether. Rob's clear-eyed assessment of the reality of life in the call centre was evident when he described why he had been moved back onto the phones from a low level management position that he enjoyed. As a result of the company having "fallen on tough times," he explains, lower level management positions were eliminated. "Production staff [phone agents] generate revenue. You don't cut back the worker bees, so... So accordingly, back up two years ago, I was a cut-back" (Rob).

From these accounts it is evident that the working conditions in the call centre are indeed problematic. Call centre workers – both phone agents and lower level managers – could benefit from some form of collective action, which could standardize compensation levels, increase job security, and attack the culture of management prerogative which has so far pervaded this work environment.

Yet most of my research participants persist in resisting unionization. Lower level managers' designated position in the call centre means they are both vulnerable to the whims of their supervisors, but also *complicit* in perpetuating capitalist ideology. As a result they often offer contradictory and competing explanations for their experiences at work. As workers who put in many unpaid hours of overtime, who sometimes struggle to make ends meet, and cope with stressful working conditions, they could benefit from a radical shift in the way work is organized. A democratization of the working process could change their lives for the better, yet low level managers resist adopting such a stance. Instead, they consider a combative stance against management as a negative thing – something to be avoided – in part because they *see themselves* as part of the management stratum. Mills (1966) suggests that those managers in the lower strata are “always in line with the aims of the employer” because they get used to “the accoutrements of authority” (123).

On a more pragmatic note, it seems likely that managers are unwilling to “rock the boat” because, as described, they are keenly aware of their vulnerable position within the organization. Without a popular pro-labour discourse (that depicts working people as competent, valuable, and knowledgeable) on which to draw, they align themselves ideologically with a capitalist discourse which de-emphasizes the importance of workers to the organization. Just as Sarah explained, rather than support the notion of autonomy for working people, the attitude of middle managers is “...just...go in, do your job and get promoted...” The organization is depicted as running harmoniously if everyone does their part. If workers are industrious and punctual and managers treat them fairly and equitably, there is “no need for there to be all that negotiating and bargaining” (Amy). Or,

as Julie informed me, if a union is brought in, union leaders must be “accepting some concessions as well.” Once low level managers are promoted up from the phones, their designated position requires them to conform to corporate ideology. Adopting an anti-union position that depicts confrontation in the workplace as undesirable is a vital part of this socialization process.

Of the eight people I interviewed, three expressed some measure of support for unionization and a strong labour movement. One woman, who articulated unmitigated approval for unionization of call centres, told me that a union might make for a “happier,” more “cooperative” working environment. She painted a picture of a workplace that was unproductive due to the tension in the setting. In this environment, every one is acting as an individual, striving to advance their own careers. “...[A] lot of people there” she explained, “they wanted just to be able to voice their opinions.”

When asked if management would actually benefit from employee suggestions, this participant responded, “Oh absolutely, they’re the ones...especially with the agents, they’re the ones on the floor, working. You know, they’re the front line” (Jane). A second woman argued that having a union protects workers from the whims of management, making it “more difficult to single out a person” (Sally). Sally complained of a work environment subject to rapid, reactionary policy changes and was clear that a unionized organization would not be similarly afflicted. Significantly, of the three research participants who were supportive of unionization, two had been moved back on to the phones from a low level management position and one had left the company to take a unionized job in healthcare. Of the remaining (largely anti-union) research participants, all five of them were actively employed in a lower level management position at the time

of the interview. Their resistance to expressing support for pro-labour sentiments is consistent with their objective position in the organization. While they may resemble phone agents in many ways (inadequate pay, stressful working conditions, little power or autonomy), their position as managers allows them to distance themselves from a pro-labour stance and to align themselves ideologically with capital. Those who had been moved back to the phones, however, did not have a similar need to construct unionism as bad for the company.

### ***Interpersonal Problems***

Lower level managers frequently account for any problems they face at work by attributing negative work experiences to interpersonal problems. When asked a very general question about describing a “work-related problem,” many of my research participants volunteered a story about an interpersonal problem they’ve experienced, rather than discussing the very real structural problems they face every day. Even those who identified their own supervisors as problematic conveyed the problem as one of a personality conflict rather than a structural one.

For example, one woman identified her biggest problem in terms of the sheer number of supervisors she has had over the years, owing to the high level of employee turnover in the call centre. She variously describes her supervisors as “cold,” “nice,” and “great.” But in listening to her stories, the overwhelming feeling one gets is the unpredictable and erratic nature of employment in the call centre. Workers are either “lucky” to report to a competent, reasonable, helpful supervisor or “unlucky” enough to have a supervisor who is none of these things. In addition, the constant shuffling of workers means each person’s supervisor can change with very little notice. States Julie:

“...I’ve been really lucky, [our director] was my manager, I think, four or five managers ago.” In other words, Julie is satisfied for the moment because her current supervisor is nice and one with whom she has worked before. But the “four or five” supervisors she has had in between may not have been as supportive or helpful, nor is it clear what recourse she would have had if she were not satisfied with her current director.

The high levels of employee turnover and the rapid, McDonaldized type of promotion mean that all too often supervisors and managers are ill-equipped for their jobs. When asked how people cope when they have lost the supervisor lottery, Julie responded: “I mean, in that case people who don’t have a very good relationship with their manager...it gets very frustrating. For off-phone [managers] I find it’s very different than for phone staff...[Whether or not you are happy] unfortunately does depend on your supervisor and your manager...”

Few of my research participants articulated a demand for consistent, supportive, capable supervision in the workplace. Frequently, they simply expressed relief or gratitude if they were satisfied with their current supervisor or frustration if they were not. Importantly, this personalizes and individualizes what is actually a structural problem – the seeming inability of the call centre to operate without an army of rapidly promoted, variously competent managers, supervisors, and directors.

When asked about her relationship with her supervisor, Sally immediately stated: “I can’t stand her. I won’t lie. We have completely different personalities.” However, she goes on to tell several stories which reveal unprofessional, unethical, and capricious behaviour on her supervisor’s part. In other words, this may not be a personality conflict but rather a result of the hiring practices of the call centre which continuously put

inexperienced supervisors in charge of others, often to fill a gap when someone has suddenly vacated a position. But without other recourse, and without a strong discourse of workers' rights from which to draw, workers attribute structural problems to personality conflicts. As Sally tells me, "...you kind of have to go into work and just kind of grin and bear it..."

The result of attributing what are structural problems to personality conflicts is that call centre workers look to individual, personal solutions. They do *not* often have faith in a union (or other form of collective action) to solve their problems at work. Describing the work environment in a call centre, Mike says, "...you put 800 grumpy people in a room? Whether they gel and bond together? That's debatable. Probably more often than not they get irritated with one another; they get frustrated with one another. They have little bickering fights...Is that the fault of a union or a non-union? No. That's just people being people." Significantly, Mike doesn't question *why* call centre workers are "grumpy" – dissatisfied, alienated, and distressed – in the first place. His reluctance to consider a harmonious workplace as a reasonable expectation of workers perhaps reflects the individualistic tendencies of neoliberal discourses.

My research participants exist in that strange realm within the call centre between production staff and upper management - as both managed and managers. All too often, they find both roles equally dissatisfying. And if it is easier to attribute their dissatisfaction with their own supervisors to personal discord than structural conflicts, it is even easier for them to do the same when they have problems with the people they manage.



One woman described a problem with a phone agent she chose to work as a “back-up trainer” – someone who could be called off the phones in the event that an extra trainer was needed. This phone agent was upset with some of the treatment she received subsequently and accused Amy (a manager) of being unfair and inflexible. However, faced with pressure from her own supervisor who did not support her choice of phone agent, she was unable to do anything more. Eventually she had to inform the phone agent “...that my decision to hire her is not popular...” Without the support of her own supervisor, which may have allowed her to resolve the situation, she must finally conclude: “that [the phone agent is] just that type of person who takes offense at feedback.” Unable to resolve the situation or identify the structural barriers preventing her from resolving the situation, she resorts to considering the situation a matter of personality conflict.

Similarly, Bill identified his worst experience in the call centre as a time when he had to lay someone off, who responded by maligning him to others in the call centre. Bill described his attitude to this person by saying, “...business is business, you know, and I mean, it’s not like I didn’t like you as a person. I don’t like you as a person *now*! But when I did it I didn’t mind you as a person, you know, you were fine.” In other words, in Bill’s mind, the negative (though perhaps understandable) reaction of the person he laid off turns this situation from an impersonal one to one of personal conflict. There is no accounting for their mutually antagonistic positions, as one who must find someone to lay off, and one who must be laid off.

Lower level managers occupy a unique position within the call centre. They no longer occupy the lowest, most vulnerable positions within the call centre, but as Sarah

admitted, they are “still on the outside lookin’ in.” Rinehart (1987) argues that managers “surveil, regulate, and control the activities of subordinate employees because the interests of the employers are often antithetical to those of the workers” (101).<sup>5</sup> In other words, the more exploitative the work, the more managers are required. However, these managers are in turn “subject to direct scrutiny and control from executives above” (ibid: 105). The conflict of interest between workers and employers is not a trait of bad corporations, it is inherent to labour relations under capitalism. The requirement of running a profitable organization compels the capitalist to control the labour process in every way possible. As Edwards (1979) reminds us, in a capitalist organization, “...the interests of workers and those of employers collide...” (12).

As managers required to police the behaviour of phone agents and as employees with stressful, unrewarding working conditions, lower level managers have a considerable amount to gain from supporting pro-labour resistance to capitalist ideology – in the form of unions, for example, or some other, more militant, form of collective action. Lower level managers in call centres, in particular, stand to benefit because, as instances of the kind of rapid, McDonaldized promotion endemic to the business support sector, they frequently find themselves in the position of managing their former peers. One could argue that lower level managers both benefit and suffer from this type of rapid promotion. Their wage may be improved by the promotion (though not usually as much as they expected), their working conditions may be more flexible, and they have a degree of autonomy not available to phone agents. However, as we have seen, the pressure to conform to management ideals, to police phone agents, and to work long hours under

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<sup>5</sup> In the fourth edition of Rinehart’s text, see pages 88-96 for a detailed examination of the degradation of technical and professional work in Canada in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the concomitant increase in management surveillance of such workers.

demanding circumstances can make the work unbearable. Even before the economic downturns in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the emergence of the new economy, Mills argues that the rationalization of office work removes much of the prestige, authority, and autonomy of management jobs (1966: 116). As Rinehart (1987) states, the role of the low level manager too often entails “responsibility without authority” (106).

It is these problematic working conditions that would make a strong labour movement so valuable to low level managers. At the same time, it is the objective position of middle managers – as purveyors of capitalist ideology – that makes it difficult for them to espouse a strong pro-labour attitude. Recent decades have witnessed the erosion of support among workers for collective action. As Winson (1997) argues, “[w]here there is no strong and well-entrenched counter-hegemonic force to challenge the dominant interpretive framework,” workers are likely to accept the hegemonic interpretation of events (449). Indeed, my research suggests that workers do not put a lot of stock in the notion of collective action, and instead might support Sarah’s sentiment: “...just go in, do your job and get promoted up into those positions.” After all, “[b]eing in a union doesn’t help you get to be CEO of a company.”

## Conclusions

### State of the Unions

In the weeks leading up to the beginning of spring, 2011, reports began to come in from several American states of union busting and anti-union legislation, including the termination of thousands of teachers in Rhode Island (RI). According to a report by the CNN Wire Staff, the Mayor of Providence, RI, sent termination notices to every teacher in the Providence public school system (CNN Wire staff, 2011). The president of Providence's teacher's union, Steve Smith, responded by saying that the firings seem "very much like what's going on in Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana, where lawmakers want to get rid of collective bargaining and remove the voice of workers" (Ibid). In Central Falls, RI, 93 public school workers including principals, teachers, and guidance counsellors were fired after the school board and the union were unable to come to an agreement about increasing compensation after teachers were asked to work a longer school day and take on additional tutoring work (Kaye, 2010). And in Wisconsin, Republican Governor Scott Walker pushed through a bill that would severely limit the collective bargaining rights of Wisconsin residents, amidst protests and demonstrations, and despite the absence of 14 Democratic senators.

In Canada, a wave of "back-to-work" legislation in 2011 and 2012 severely eroded the bargaining power of airplane pilots, Toronto public transit employees, and postal workers (Payton, 2012; CBC News 2011a; CBC News 2011b). Beyond this, however, the legislation gave government representatives the opportunity to construct unionism as a drain on the public coffers. In the case of striking postal workers, the director of Canada Post, Jon Hamilton, stated in the news that Canada Post was unable to

meet the demands of its workers because of the cost to taxpayers (CBC News, 2011a).

The strike ended when postal workers were ordered back to work, prompting the union to contest this decision in court (Wherry, 2011).

More recently, Air Canada pilots who sought to exercise their right to strike were ordered back to work in March when federal Labour Minister Lisa Raitt called upon the Canada Industrial Relations Board, thereby rendering any work stoppage illegal (Payton, 2012). The problem with the pilots going on strike, Raitt stated, was that “at some point...the Canadian public interest does come into play” (Ibid). Given that the pilots are appealing the decision that forced them back to work on the grounds that it conflicts with Canadian Aviation safety regulations, it would seem that the public interest Raitt is invoking is not one of public safety, but the potential economic losses of Air Canada.

The outcome of so much anti-union legislation in such a short amount of time is not known. While pro-union protestors are actively mounting demonstrations, it is unclear whether conservative news outlets will successfully construct these protestors as dangerous and reactionary, or whether the anger over the anti-labour manoeuvres will spread. Could rapid assaults on collective bargaining be the catalyst for a regeneration of pro-labour sentiment among workers? Winson (1997), in his study of economic restructuring and insecurity in rural Ontario, acknowledges that while leftist researchers hope that such conditions will always contribute to a cultural shift towards the left, “...the high unemployment associated with the vicious recession of the early 1990s had a definite dampening effect on the labour movement...” (438). In other words, sometimes severe anti-labour policies and the harsh conditions of generalized economic downturn can serve to demoralize and deaden the labour movement further. When workers are

scrambling to replace lost jobs and wages, it sometimes means they have little time and energy left for organizing around the issue of workers' rights.

Similarly, Panitch (1986) notes that the economic downturn that began in the 1970s and severely eroded ideological support for the Keynesian welfare state did not have the anticipated effect of radicalizing the working classes (2). Panitch attributes this to the weakness of the leftist response at the time and "the failure to generate socialist consciousness in the period of capitalist boom" which left workers without a discourse that would enable them to make sense of their lives in the period of bust which followed (Ibid).

While the Occupy movement has had its share of media attention and support from critical-minded academics, the acid test will come in the form of worker response to the movement, its discourses, and its goals. To the degree that the movement is largely comprised of relatively left-sympathetic students and activists, it remains to be seen whether the Occupy movement will be able to make itself legible to the remainder of Canadians and simultaneously present a coherent, sustained challenge to capitalist prerogative.

In Canada, most of my research participants demonstrated what might be considered "middle class" values of hard work, personal sacrifice, and loyalty to one's employer. Those that espoused unerringly pro-union attitudes had either left the call centre for a unionized job, or had been moved back onto the phones from a lower level management position. Although my research participants come from largely working class backgrounds and have comparatively little formal education, the majority of them

constructed unions as protecting lazy workers, as inefficient, or as irrelevant to today's "friendly" organization.

And yet the call centre, I discovered, is not so friendly to those of my research participants who complained of "drowning" under their workload, of being driven "nuts" by the pressure of balancing the demands of parenting with being on-call 24 hours a day. More research is needed to understand what prevents predominantly working class people with unsatisfactory work lives from supporting some form of collective action. The limited scope of my research can not address all of the salient issues here.

However, my research suggests that when working class people are promoted to entry-level management positions, they feel pressure to adopt the capitalist values of their supervisors. Frequently, these conservative views take the shape of disdain for, or disapproval of, phone agents. Some of my research participants espoused paternalistic views towards the phone agents and some suggested that phone agents would be unable to find jobs outside of a call centre (where, presumably, they imagine there are higher standards to which workers must adhere). Some presented moralizing attitudes about the work ethic of phone agents. All of my research participants *not* in favour of unionism expressed grave doubts about the ability of workers to manage themselves in the organization. The ability of workers to run a profitable organization without an owner or executive class is a central tenet of Marxist class consciousness and an important element of a vital labour movement. The attitudes of workers in the 21st century towards such a notion must be researched further.

Lower level managers' objective role within the organization encourages them to look down on phone agents and inhibits support for pro-labour attitudes. Their role as

supervisors of phone agents does not allow much space for feelings of solidarity with them. Rather, they construct unionism as dangerous because it is antagonistic to the organization – and as managers, therefore dangerous to them.<sup>1</sup>

This is exactly the tactic used by Gov. Scott Walker when he states that limiting people's rights to collective bargaining "protects middle class jobs" and "middle class taxpayers" (Fox News, 2011). Unionism is constructed as "working class" and the middle class and the working class are pitted against each other. My research suggests that lower level managers could benefit from a collective agreement which limits their unpaid overtime, standardizes promotions and wage increases, and helps workers save for retirement. In contrast to the notion that unionism is a drain on the middle class taxpayer, my research suggests that working conditions are sufficiently bad for even some managers, that some type of collective action is appropriate and desirable. However, workers are unlikely to act collectively or even indicate support for collective action in a milieu where claims like Walker's are not seriously contested or examined in the mainstream media or the public education system. The situation facing the labour movement today has not improved much since Edwards wrote in 1979 that "[d]ivisions within the working class have distorted and blunted the class opposition to capitalism, making for a weak socialist movement and a long period of relative stability within the regime of monopoly capitalism" (163).

Research on call centres has been progressing in the past decade; however, more research is needed that explores how call centre workers are pressured and constrained on the job, and how (if at all) they resist such treatment. And while research on working

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<sup>1</sup> In reality, as Mills so deftly demonstrated in his landmark text on the white collar world, low level managers often have much more in common with the "rank and file" than they believe, and they stand to benefit from acting in solidarity with production staff.



class consciousness has a long and varied history, much more research needs to be conducted on the ability of lower level managers to resist the corporate ideology with which they are inundated daily. Accepting a promotion to the ranks of management is only a logical and pragmatic step for people who are trying to make ends meet in a competitive and rapidly shifting labour market. Vulnerable populations like single parents, recent immigrants, non-native English speakers, and those without formal education may be even more eager to accept the opportunity for advancement. More research is needed to understand how such people fare once they are promoted, as my research suggests that this is not the end of their stressful working conditions and that they will face completely new sets of problems unique to lower level managers.

Beyond these issues, however, my research draws links to broader concerns, including the ability of workers to develop strong community bonds which will increase their chances of contributing to, and benefiting, from a vibrant labour movement capable of adapting to the changing economy and becoming more attuned to issues of gendered and racialized inequalities. Research on working conditions and labour processes is not meant only to illuminate what happens in people's lives between 9:00 and 5:00. Often, a person may take a large part of her or his sense of self from what is done on the job. If people are not able to value what they do on the job or worse, are not able to tap into a discourse that constructs their contributions as meaningful, the consequences for their self-worth can be far reaching. Whether or not people feel that they are valuable members of society depends on a myriad of factors. Certainly, trade unions have tirelessly worked to highlight the contribution of workers to society and thereby demand a greater share of the dividends from that labour for workers and their families. However, they have

struggled to resist neoliberal restructuring and are not in a position to challenge the foundation of capitalist accumulation – foundations on which they themselves are built.

To some extent, unions have suffered from a tarnished image and many workers have become disillusioned with the very concept of unionization and what it stands for. In addition, where workers are, in fact, keen to organize, corporations draw upon vast resources to prevent the certification of a union. Recent attempts by the United Food and Commercial Workers' union to organize Wal-mart workers across Canada are indicative of just how far the Wal-mart corporation is prepared to go to protect itself from the reaches of the union (Clark and Warskett, 2010). In some cases, organizers have tried to bypass the certification process, relying on associations with no legal recognition to “empower” workers (*Ibid*, 244). The determination of workers to resist subordination despite the disappointments of the union in this setting is a testament both to the untapped potential of workers in the new economy and perhaps also workers' disillusionment with traditional methods of organizing. As Clark and Warskett conclude, it is unclear whether these efforts will “aid in the unionization of Wal-mart stores” or whether they can “be sustained without unionization” (*Ibid*, 244-245).

Certainly, the current economic crisis gives trade unions, left academics, and the labour movement more broadly, a chance to prove its worth. The social unrest in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa; the Occupy movement; and the expanding gap between the rich and the poor in evidence in almost every part of the world all present an opportunity to remake the left into a movement capable of posing a final challenge to a global order which disenfranchises the very people upon whose labour it rests.

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**Brock  
University**

Office of Research Services  
Research Ethics Office  
St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1  
T: 905-688-5550, Ext. 3035/4876 F: 905-688-0748

[www.brocku.ca](http://www.brocku.ca)

DATE: July 10, 2008

FROM: Michelle McGinn, Chair  
Research Ethics Board (REB) 

TO: Ann Duffy, Social Justice and Equity Studies  
Elizabeth Maddeaux

FILE: 07-307 DUFFY/MADDEAUX

TITLE: Consciousness and Unionization Among Call Centre Workers in Southern Ontario

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The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

**DECISION:** Accepted as clarified.

This project has received ethics clearance for the period of July 10, 2008 to January 31, 2009 subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The clearance period may be extended upon request. ***The study may now proceed.***

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and cleared by the REB. During the course of research no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment, or consent form may be initiated without prior written clearance from the REB. The Board must provide clearance for any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to <http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/forms> to complete the appropriate form Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form *Continuing Review/Final Report* is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

MM/kw



Brock University  
Research Ethics Office  
Tel: 905-688-5550 ext. 3035  
Email: reb@brocku.ca

Social Science Research Ethics Board

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**Certificate of Ethics Clearance for Human Participant Research**

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DATE: 8/5/2011  
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: DUFFY/MADDEAUX, Ann - Social Justice and Equity Studies  
FILE: 07-307 - DUFFY/MADDEAUX  
TYPE: Masters Thesis/Project STUDENT: Elizabeth Maddeaux  
SUPERVISOR: Ann Duffy  
TITLE: Consciousness and Unionization Among Call Centre Workers in Southern Ontario

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**ETHICS CLEARANCE GRANTED**

Type of Clearance: RENEWAL

Expiry Date: 8/31/2012

The Brock University Social Sciences Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above named research proposal and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement. Clearance granted from 8/5/2011 to 8/31/2012.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored by, at a minimum, an annual report. Should your project extend beyond the expiry date, you are required to submit a Renewal form before 8/31/2012. Continued clearance is contingent on timely submission of reports.

To comply with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, you must also submit a final report upon completion of your project. All report forms can be found on the Research Ethics web page at <http://www.brocku.ca/research/policies-and-forms/research-forms>.

In addition, throughout your research, you must report promptly to the REB:

- a) Changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
- b) All adverse and/or unanticipated experiences or events that may have real or potential unfavourable implications for participants;
- c) New information that may adversely affect the safety of the participants or the conduct of the study;
- d) Any changes in your source of funding or new funding to a previously unfunded project.

We wish you success with your research.

Approved:

Jan Frijters, Chair  
Social Sciences Research Ethics Board

**Note:** Brock University is accountable for the research carried out in its own jurisdiction or under its auspices and may refuse certain research even though the REB has found it ethically acceptable.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of research at that site.

Reviewer Disposition			
For REB Use Only	File # 07-307	Revisors DON/MBK	Prep # HJ2163
Decision	Approved as is	Approval Pending Revision	Clarification Required
Resubmission	Full Review	Without Approval	

## Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB)

Application for Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Participants

RECEIVED

MAY 07 2008

Please refer to the documents "Brock University Research Ethics Guidelines", which can be found at <http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/>, prior to completion and submission of this application.

If you have questions about or require assistance with the completion of this form, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 ext. 3035, or [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

Return your completed application and all accompanying material in triplicate to the Research Ethics Office in MacKenzie Chown D250A.  
Handwritten Applications will *not* be accepted

Please ensure all necessary items are attached prior to submission, otherwise your application will not be processed (see checklist below).

***No research with human participants shall commence prior to receiving approval from the research ethics board.***

DOCUMENT CHECKLIST	Yes/No/Not applicable
Complete sets of the following documents (one original + 2 copies)	
Recruitment Materials	
• Letter of invitation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Verbal script	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Telephone script	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Advertisements (newspapers, posters, SONA)	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Electronic correspondence guide	<input type="checkbox"/>
Consent Materials	
• Consent form	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Assent form for minors	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Parental/3 <sup>rd</sup> party consent	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Transcriber confidentiality agreement	<input type="checkbox"/>
Data Gathering Instruments	
• Questionnaires	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Interview guides	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Tests	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feedback Letter	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Letter of Approval for research from cooperating organizations, school board(s), or other institutions	<input type="checkbox"/>
Any previously approved protocol to which you refer	<input type="checkbox"/>
Request for use of human tissue sample in research	<input type="checkbox"/>
Please Note: this form is required for all research projects involving human tissue, bodily fluids, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Signed Application Form	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

### Research Ethics Office

• Brock University • 500 Glenridge Ave • St. Catharines, ON • L2S 3A1 • Fax: 905-688-0748

## SIGNATURES

**PLEASE NOTE:** The title "principal investigator" designates the person who is "in charge" of the research. In this position, the principal investigator is assumed to have the abilities to supervise other researchers, be responsible for the financial administration of the project, have the authority to ensure that appropriate guidelines and regulations are followed, and be competent to conduct the research in the absence of faculty supervision. The restriction of the term "principal investigator" to faculty or post-doctoral fellows does not have implications for ownership of intellectual property or publication authorship. Given the above consideration, a student cannot be identified as a "principal investigator". However, for the purpose of recognizing a student's leadership role in the research, a faculty member may designate a "principal student investigator" below.

### INVESTIGATORS:

Please indicate that you have read and fully understand all ethics obligations by checking the box beside each statement and signing below.

- ☒ I have read Section III: 8 of Brock University's Faculty Handbook pertaining to Research Ethics and agree to comply with the policies and procedures outlined therein.
- ☒ I will report any serious adverse events (SAE) to the Research Ethics Board (REB).
- ☒ Any additions/changes to research procedures after approval has been granted will be submitted to the REB.
- ☒ I agree to request a renewal of approval for any project continuing beyond the expected date of completion or for more than one year.
- ☒ I will submit a final report to the Office of Research Services once the research has been completed.
- ☒ I take full responsibility for ensuring that all other investigators involved in this research follow the protocol as outlined in this application.

#### Principal Investigator

Signature Clayton Madhup Date: 30/04/08

#### Principal Student Investigator (optional)

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Co-Investigators:

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### FACULTY SUPERVISOR:

Please indicate that you have read and fully understand the obligations as faculty supervisor listed below by checking the box beside each statement.

- ☒ I agree to provide the proper supervision of this study to ensure that the rights and welfare of all human participants are protected.
- ☒ I will ensure a request for renewal of a proposal is submitted if the study continues beyond the expected date of completion or for more than one year.
- ☒ I will ensure that a final report is submitted to the Office of Research Services.
- ☒ I have read and approved this application and proposal.

Signature J. Duffy Date: April 30, 2008

#### Research Ethics Office

• Brock University • 500 Glenridge Ave • St. Catharines, ON • L2S 3A1 • Fax: 905-688-0748

## SECTION A – GENERAL INFORMATION

1. Title of the Research Project: Consciousness and Unionization Among Call Centre Workers in Southern Ontario

### 2. Investigator Information:

	Name	Position (e.g., faculty, student, visiting professor)	Dept./Address	Phone No.	E-Mail
Principal Investigator					
Principal Student Investigator	Elizabeth Maddeaux	Graduate student	Social Justice and Equity Studies	905-834-0557	rm04dg@brocku.ca
Co-Investigator(s)					
Faculty Supervisor(s)	Ann Duffy	Full Professor	Sociology	905-688-5550 ext. 404	aduffy@brocku.ca

3. Proposed Date of commencement: ☒ upon approval, OR ☐ other. Please provide date (dd/mm/yyyy) \_\_\_\_\_

Proposed Date of completion (dd/mm/yyyy): 31/01/2009

4. Indicate the location(s) where the research will be conducted:

Brock University ☐  
 Community Site ☐  
 School Board ☐  
 Hospital ☐  
 Other ☐

☒ Specify: two call centres in the Niagara Region  
☐ Specify \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Specify \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Specify \_\_\_\_\_

### 5. Other Ethics Clearance/Permission:

(a) Is this a multi-centered study?

☒ Yes ☐ No

(b) Has any other University Research Ethics Board approved this research?

☐ Yes ☒ No

If YES, there is no need to provide further details about the protocol at this time, provided that all of the following information is provided:

Title of the project approved elsewhere: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of the Other Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of the Other Board: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of the Decision: \_\_\_\_\_

A contact name and phone number for the other Board: \_\_\_\_\_

Please provide a copy of the application to the other institution together with all accompanying materials, as well as a copy of the clearance certificate / approval.

If NO, will any other University Research Ethics Board be asked for approval?

☐ Yes ☒ No

Specify University/College \_\_\_\_\_

(c) Has any other person(s) or institutions granted permission to conduct this research? ☐ Yes x ☒ No  
If yes, specify (e.g., hospital, school board, community organization, proprietor) provide details and attach any relevant documentation. \_\_\_\_\_

If NO, will any other person(s) or institutions be asked for approval? ☐ Yes x ☒ No  
Specify (e.g., hospital, school board, community organization, proprietor) \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Level of the Research:**

- |  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate Thesis                                      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Masters Thesis/Project             | <input type="checkbox"/> Ph.D                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Post Doctorate  | <input type="checkbox"/> Faculty Research                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Administration               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate Course Assignment<br>(specify course) _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Graduate Course Assignment<br>(specify) _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify course) _____ |

**7. Funding of the Project:**

- (a) Is this project currently being funded ☐ Yes x ☒ No  
(b) If No, is funding being sought ☐ Yes x ☒ No

**If Applicable:**

- (c) Period of Funding (dd/mm/yyyy): From: \_\_\_\_\_ To: \_\_\_\_\_  
(d) Agency or Sponsor (funded or applied for)

☐ CIHR ☐ NSERC ☐ SSHRC ☐ Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

- (e) Funding / Agency File # (not your Tri-Council PIN) \_\_\_\_\_

**8. Conflict of Interest:**

(a) Will the researcher(s), members of the research team, and/or their partners or immediate family members receive any personal benefits related to this study - Examples include financial remuneration, patent and ownership, employment, consultancies, board membership, share ownership, stock options. Do not include conference and travel expense coverage, possible academic promotion, or other benefits which are integral to the general conduct of research.

☐ Yes x ☒ No

If Yes, please describe the benefits below:

- (b) Describe any restrictions regarding access to or disclosure of information (during or at the end of the study) that the sponsor has placed on the investigator(s).

**SECTION B - SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH**

**9. Rationale:**

Briefly describe the purpose and background rationale for the proposed project, as well as the hypothesis(es)/research question(s) to be examined.

Purpose: to understand the class consciousness of call centre workers, their feelings towards unionization, the impact of their work on their feelings of alienation, and how they describe the quality of

their work life. Research questions: What aspects of call centre work do low level managers identify as being negative? What is the impact of these negative job experiences on employees' opinion of unionization? Rationale: Call centre work is a common source of employment for those with few formal skills or training, for those re-entering the labour force after raising children or being laid off, and for students. Even government employees increasingly find themselves delivering their services over the phone in a call centre. It is important, therefore, to understand the quality of such work.

#### 10. Methods:

Are any of the following procedures or methods involved in this study? Check all that apply.

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Questionnaire (mail)                | <input type="checkbox"/> Focus Groups   | <input type="checkbox"/> Non-Invasive physical measurement (e.g., exercise, heart rate, blood pressure)                                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Questionnaire (email/web)           | <input type="checkbox"/> Journals/Diaries/Personal Correspondence                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Analysis of human tissue, body fluids, etc. (Request for Use of Human Tissue Sample must be completed and attached) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Questionnaire (in person)           | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Audio/Video taping (specify: audiotaping)                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: (specify) _____  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Interview(s) (telephone)            | <input type="checkbox"/> Observations   |  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Interview(s) (in person) | <input type="checkbox"/> Invasive physiological measurements (e.g. venipuncture, muscle biopsies) |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Secondary Data                      |   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Computer-administered tasks         |   |  |

Describe sequentially, and in detail, all of the methods involved in this study and all procedures in which the research participants will be involved (paper and pencil tasks, interviews, questionnaires, physical assessments, physiological tests, time requirements, etc.)

Attach a copy of all questionnaire(s), interview guides or other test instruments. If reference is made to previous protocols, please provide copies of relevant documentation.

Those low level managers who may be interested in participating will be given (outside the workplace) a letter of invitation, asking them to contact the researcher if they wish to participate in the research. Participants will be asked to identify a convenient time and location for the interview. During the interview, participants will be asked a series of questions about their experiences on the job, their attitudes towards aspects of call centre work, and their feelings about unionization. Attempts will be made to understand the role participants see the call centre playing in their work lives, and to situate their current work in a life trajectory to understand what life circumstances led them to their current employment. Interviews will be informal and semi-structured. The researcher will make use of any topics or themes the participant identifies and will explore such themes with the participant. Therefore, interview guides (see attached) are only tentative. Questions may not be asked in the same sequence in every interview.

#### 11. Professional Expertise/Qualifications:

Does this procedure require professional expertise/recognized qualifications (e.g., registration as a clinical psychologist, first aid certification)?

☐ Yes specify: \_\_\_\_\_ ☒ No

If YES, indicate whether you, your supervisor, or any members of your research team have the professional expertise/recognized qualifications required? ☐ Yes ☐ No

#### 12. Participants:

Describe the number of participants and any required demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender).

Research will involve between 10 and 12 participants, most of whom will be between the ages of 25 and 45. Participants represent a variety of ethnic groups and religious affiliations. I am anticipating roughly equal representation of genders.



**13. Recruitment:**

Describe how and from what sources the participants will be recruited, including any relationship between the investigator(s), sponsor(s) and participant(s) (e.g., family member, instructor-student; manager-employee).

Attach a copy of any poster(s), advertisement(s) and/or letter(s) to be used for recruitment.

The researcher has acquaintances in two call centres in the Niagara Region. The researcher will give her contact information to these acquaintances and ask that any employees interested in participating in the research are welcome to contact the researcher. Participants will be asked to give the researcher's contact information to any employee that they feel might be interested in participating in the research.

**14. Compensation:**

- a) Will participants receive compensation for participation?  
b) If yes, please provide details.

☐ Yes ☒ No

**SECTION C – DESCRIPTION OF THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH**

**15. Possible Risks:**

- 1) Indicate if the participants might experience any of the following risks:

- a) Physical risks (including any bodily contact, physical stress, or administration of any substance)?  
☐ Yes ☐ No
- b) Psychological risks (including feeling demeaned, embarrassed, worried or upset, emotional stress)?  
☒ Yes ☐ No
- c) Social risks (including possible loss of status, privacy, and / or reputation)?  
☐ Yes ☐ No
- d) Are any possible risks to participants greater than those that the participants might encounter in their everyday life?  
☐ Yes ☒ No
- e) Is there any deception involved?  
☐ Yes ☒ No
- f) Is there potential for participants to feel obligated to participate or coerced into contributing to this research (because of regular contact between participants and the researcher, relationships that involve power-dynamics, etc.)?  
☐ Yes ☒ No

- 2) If you answered Yes to any of 1a – 1f above, please explain the risk.

Participants may find it relevant to describe unpleasant experiences on the job which could lead to the participant feeling upset or experiencing emotional stress. Recounting experiences participants found stressful could lead to feelings of mild distress but such distress is not likely to be more than participants face in everyday life and such disclosure is voluntary.

- 3) Describe how the risks will be managed and include the availability of appropriate medical or clinical expertise or qualified persons. Explain why less risky alternative approaches could not be used.

Participants will be alerted to this possibility before they agree to participate in the informed consent form

and verbally. The researcher will notify participants when the interview proceeds to more personal questions. At this point, participants will be reminded of their right to end the interview at any time and to refuse to answer any question. Participants may find answering survey questions less emotionally distressing, but such an approach would not allow participants to describe their work experiences in their own words.

#### 16. Possible Benefits:

Discuss any potential direct benefits to the participants from their involvement in the project. Comment on the (potential) benefits to the scientific community/society that would justify involvement of participants in this study.

In such a situation, where there is potential for employees to feel isolated or alienated from their co-workers, the research may give employees an opportunity to see shared experiences and common concerns. Potential benefits to the scientific community include an increased understanding of the quality of work in call centres. Specifically, research in this area contributes to our knowledge of the benefits and drawbacks experienced by low level managers in call centres. As call centres proliferate in Canada, it is crucial to understand how employees view this type of work and how work can be organized to fulfill employees' intangible needs for things like social interaction and self-determination. Additionally, the research might contribute to our knowledge of union density trends—specifically, whether union density is likely to continue to fall, based on employees' attitudes to unionization.

### SECTION D – THE INFORMED CONSENT PROCESS

#### 17. The Consent Process:

Describe the process that the investigator(s) will be using to obtain informed consent. Include a description of who will be obtaining the informed consent. If there will be no written consent form, explain why not.

For information about the required elements in the letter of invitation and the consent form, as well as samples, please refer to: <http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/forms/index.php>

**If applicable, attach a copy of the Letter of Invitation, the Consent Form, the content of any telephone script, and any other material that will be utilized in the informed consent process.**

At the start of every interview, the participant will be asked to read and sign the informed consent form (see attached). The researcher will highlight verbally for the each participant the most important aspects of the form (i.e. possible risks, the right to withdraw, expected duration, etc.).

#### 18. Consent by an authorized party:

If the participants are minors or for other reasons are not competent to consent, describe the proposed alternative source of consent, including any permission form to be provided to the person(s) providing the alternative consent.

#### 19. Alternatives to prior individual consent:

If obtaining individual participant consent prior to commencement of the research project is not appropriate for this research, please explain and provide details for a proposed alternative consent process.

## 20. Feedback to Participants:

Explain what feedback/ information will be provided to the participants after participation in the project. This should include a more complete description of the purpose of the research, and access to the results of the research. Also, describe the method and timing for delivering the feedback.

Participants will be sent a letter of thanks upon completion of their interview (see attached). In this letter, participants will be invited to contact me if they wish to receive a brief summary of the research.

## 21. Participant withdrawal:

- a) Describe how the participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the project. Outline the procedures that will be followed to allow the participants to exercise this right.

Participants will be asked to read and sign the informed consent form which notifies them of their right to withdraw (see attached). Participants will be reminded of their right to withdraw and to refuse to answer any question before commencing the interview. If the participant requests that the interview be stopped, she will be asked if she wishes that her data be included or destroyed. If the participant appears uncomfortable or upset, he will be asked if he wishes to end the interview and whether to include or destroy the data.

- b) Indicate what will be done with the participant's data should the participant choose to withdraw. Describe what, if any, consequences withdrawal might have on the participant, including any effect that withdrawal may have on participant compensation.

Data will be included in the final report or destroyed immediately depending on the participant's wishes. Withdrawal will have no consequences for the participant.

## SECTION E – CONFIDENTIALITY & ANONYMITY

**Confidentiality:** information revealed by participants that holds the expectation of privacy. This means that all data collected will not be shared with anyone except the researchers listed on this application.

**Anonymity of data:** Information revealed by participants will not have any distinctive character or recognition factor, such that information can be matched (even by the researcher) to individual participants. Any information collected using audio-taping, video recording, or interview cannot be considered anonymous. Please note that this refers to the anonymity of the data itself and not the reporting of results.

## 22. Given the definitions above:

- a) Will the data be treated as confidential? ☒ Yes ☐ No  
b) Are the data anonymous? ☐ Yes ☒ No

- c) Describe any **personal identifiers** that will be collected during the course of the research (e.g., participant names, initials, addresses, birth dates, student numbers, organizational names and titles etc.). Indicate how personal identifiers will be secured and if they will be retained once data collection is complete.

Demographic identifiers such as name, address, birth year, birth place, and contact information will be collected. In some cases, such information is revealed in the course of an interview and provides contextual information relevant to the research question. Contact information will be collected at the beginning of the interview to facilitate giving feedback to respondents. Such information will be destroyed upon completion of the research.

d) If any personal identifiers will be retained once data collection is complete, provide a comprehensive rationale explaining why it is necessary to retain this information, including the retention of master lists that link participant identifiers with unique study codes and de-identified data.

e) State who will have access to the data.

The principal student investigator and the faculty supervisor.

f) Describe the procedures to be used to ensure anonymity of participants and/or confidentiality of data both during the conduct of the research and in the release of its findings.

Contact Information will be stored in a locked cabinet in the principal student investigator's home and not published with the research findings. Audiotapes, transcriptions, and any other participant information will be stored in a locked cabinet in the principal student investigator's home. Participants will not be identified by name in the research findings and no information will be used that might identify the participants in the research findings. Pseudonyms will be used when referring to participants in the research.

g) If participant anonymity and/or confidentiality is not appropriate to this research project, explain, in detail, how all participants will be advised that data will not be anonymous or confidential.

h) Explain how written records, video/audio tapes, and questionnaires will be secured, and provide details of their final disposal or storage, including how long they will be secured and the disposal method to be used.

Audiotapes and transcriptions will be stored in a locked cabinet in the principal student investigator's home until the research is complete. Upon completion of the research, audiotapes and transcriptions will be destroyed.

## SECTION F -- SECONDARY USE OF DATA

23.

a) Is it your intention to reanalyze the data for purposes other than described in this application?  
☐ Yes ☒ No

b) Is it your intention to allow the study and data to be reanalyzed by colleagues, students, or other researchers outside of the original research purposes? If this is the case, explain how you will allow your participants the opportunity to choose to participate in a study where their data would be distributed to others (state how you will contact participants to obtain their re-consent)

No.

c) If there are no plans to reanalyze the data for secondary purposes and, yet, you wish to keep the data indefinitely, please explain why.

## SECTION G -- MONITORING ONGOING RESEARCH

It is the investigator's responsibility to notify the REB using the "Renewal/Project Completed" form, when the project is completed or if it is cancelled.  
<http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/forms/index.php>

**24. Annual Review and Serious Adverse Events (SAE):**

**a) MINIMUM REVIEW REQUIRES THE RESEARCHER COMPLETE A "RENEWAL/PROJECT COMPLETED" FORM AT LEAST ANNUALLY.**

Indicate whether any additional monitoring or review would be appropriate for this project.

**I do not anticipate that data collection will extend beyond one year.**

**\*Serious adverse events (negative consequences or results affecting participants) must be reported to the Research Ethics Officer and the REB Chair, as soon as possible and, in any event, no more than 3 days subsequent to their occurrence.**

**25. COMMENTS**

If you experience any problems or have any questions about the Ethics Review Process at Brock University, please feel free to contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 ext 3035, or [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca)

## Letter of Invitation

### Consciousness and Unionization among Call Centre Workers in Southern Ontario

Principal Student Investigator: Elizabeth Maddeaux, graduate student

Faculty Supervisor: Ann Duffy (aduffy@brocku.ca)

REB File #

Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Elizabeth Maddeaux and I am a graduate student at Brock University. I am interested in doing research which explores the working experiences of individuals employed in a supervisory or management capacity at a call centre in the Niagara Region.

The research involves a one-hour interview to be scheduled at your convenience and at a location of your choosing.

All information you provide during the course of the interview is confidential. No information about you that could be used to identify you will be retained in the final report. You will be assigned a pseudonym.

I would take this opportunity to ask that you take care to protect yours and others' privacy with respect to this study.

Data collected during this study will be stored in a locked cabinet in the principal student investigator's home. Data will be kept for nine months, after which time audiotapes and transcriptions will be destroyed.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Only I and my faculty supervisor, Ann Duffy, will have access to the information you provide.

I believe this is a very important topic and that it is important to hear from individuals about their actual work experiences. So, I am hoping that you will be able to take the time to participate in my research. I think you will find it a rewarding experience. If you think you may be interested in participating and would like to learn more, please contact me at the following:

Home phone: 905-834-0557

E-mail: [rm04dg@brocku.ca](mailto:rm04dg@brocku.ca)

Thank you,

Elizabeth Maddeaux

# Informed Consent Form

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Project Title: Consciousness and Unionization among Call Centre Workers in Southern Ontario

Principal Student Investigator: Elizabeth Maddeaux, graduate student

Program: Social Justice and Equity Studies

Brock University

905-834-0557

rm04dg@brocku.ca

Faculty Supervisor: Ann Duffy, full professor

Department of Sociology

Brock University

(905) 688-5550 Ext: 3517

aduffy@brocku.ca

## INVITATION

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is to understand the work environment in a call centre and the impact of this environment on your attitudes towards work and unionization.

## WHAT'S INVOLVED

As a participant, you will be asked to answer interview questions about your role in the company, any negative job experiences you may have had, your thoughts and feelings on the usefulness of unions, and your quality of work life. You will be asked to pass along my contact information to any co-worker that might also be interested in participating in the research. Participation will take approximately one hour of your time. Interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed.

## POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

Possible benefits of participation include learning that your co-workers share similar concerns or experiences. Possible benefits to the scientific community include an increased understanding of Canadians' attitudes towards work and unionization. There also may be risks associated with participation, including feelings of mild distress or emotional stress brought on by recounting unpleasant work experiences. Such risks are no greater than those you may face in everyday life. You will be notified by the researcher when the interview is proceeding to more personal questions.

Please note that in addition to the risks mentioned above, participating in this research could affect employment relations. Choosing to discuss work conditions and unionization could be perceived negatively by your supervisors.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

All information you provide during the course of the interview is confidential. No information about you that could be used to identify you will be retained in the final report. You will be assigned a pseudonym.

Data collected during this study will be stored in a locked cabinet in the principal student investigator's home. Data will be kept for nine months after which time audiotapes and transcriptions will be destroyed. Access to this data will be restricted to Elizabeth Maddeaux and Ann Duffy.

## VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.

## PUBLICATION OF RESULTS

Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available upon completion of the research (January 2009). You will be given an opportunity to indicate whether you would like to receive feedback about this study after the interview is complete.

## CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact the Principal Investigator or the Faculty Supervisor (where applicable) using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University (file # 07-307). If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

## CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_